

Our District Superintendent, Rev. Jim Powell, shared a story about prayer and healing during the District Conference on May 4. The story originated with Rev. Fred Craddock, well known as a preacher and a storyteller. As Rev Jim said, the only thing about one of Rev Craddock's stories is that you are never sure if they really happened or not.

Any how, as the story goes, many, many years ago, when doctors would talk to clergy and clergy were considered a vital part of the healing process, a newly appointed pastor to the church, fresh out of seminary, received a call from the local doctor. Doris, an elderly member of the congregation had been hospitalized and by all accounts had only a few hours to live. The family had requested his presence. The young pastor said he would be right over. But as he was making his way from the church to the hospital he struggled, unsure of what to say or do.

When he got to Doris' room he discovered she still had the ability to speak and was very aware of what was happening around her. He turned to her and said, "I don't really know what to say." An honest although, awkward statement. She turned to him and suggested that he offer a prayer. He thought that was a good idea and so started to pray but had one of those split second internal discussions about what do I pray for - healing, speedy death, peace, what? So he turned to her and said, "What would you like me to pray for." And she immediately and emphatically said – "Well my healing of course." While thinking this was a strange request from someone on their death bed, he dutifully prayed to God for her healing – healing in body and spirit, healing as only God could provide. When he finished the prayer, she sat up and then stood up and then started to hop around the room. With her arms raised she kept shouting, "I am healed, I am healed. Praise God!!" Her commotion was so great the medical team came running while the gob smacked pastor slunk out of the room. Running and stumbling out of the hospital, he eventually fell on his knees in the parking lot. He prayed with his arms lifted upward, "Lord God, please don't ever do that to me again."

I can truly relate to the dilemma of the young pastor. When a person is in the process of transitioning from this life to the next it is always difficult to know what to pray for. Sometimes family members and even the dying seek prayers for a speedy and painless transition from this life to the next. Sometimes they want prayers for healing and a return to life as it once was. Some just want the presence of someone who understands the confusion and pain of the process of letting go. They want someone to just sit with them, hold their hand, and listen, even if it is only to the beeping of the heart monitor. Only once have I had a family that found my presence intrusive, even though they knew that their now comatose mother would have requested my presence if she had been able to speak. There have been a few times when I have been called to one's bedside, assured by medical staff that death

was imminent, offered a prayer and an anointing, only to learn that death was not speedy and there was even a time of revival, a renewal of spirit.

In the case of Doris, her renewal was definitely of body and spirit – in a way that defies the laws of nature. In the case of Dorcas also called Tabitha, her revival, her return to life was of body and spirit as well as a revival of the spirit and life of the community she truly cared for and tended.

We learn some interesting things from this healing account in the Book of Acts. Communities of followers of Jesus are growing throughout the region, including the east coast of the Mediterranean just north and west of Galilee. Peter has ventured out of Jerusalem into the countryside sharing the message of Jesus' resurrection and God's mercy and grace. Peter has taken on the spiritual mantle that Jesus gave to him – to shepherd, to feed and care for and to love, Jesus' sheep. And he is being effective. His reputation has begun to spread throughout the area. Word has spread that he healed a paralytic, bedridden for 8 years, in Jesus' name. As a result many came to listen to him, to be healed by him, and to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

Dorcas, a Hellenistic Jew, called Tabitha by the Jewish community and Dorcas by the Greeks, was most likely a widow who cared for other widows. The caring for the widow community in Joppa was an important part of the ministry of the Joppa church. As Peter stood beside Tabitha's bed, the women showed him the fruits of Tabitha's labors. They shared with Peter the wonders of her ministry and their overwhelming grief upon her death.

You have to wonder why the women would have felt it important to send two disciples to find Peter requesting his immediate attention? What were they hoping for? Were they hoping for a resurrection miracle? Did they want an apostle to conduct the graveside service? Were they hoping to have some guidance and support in their time of despair? I don't think we will ever know their motivation. What we do know is that letting go, saying goodbye is always difficult and heart wrenching.

Whatever their hopes, they got Tabitha back and the community was restored to a level of wholeness that made them comfortable and enabled them to keep their mission alive. In addition to Tabitha's renewal, the community received the support of Peter, who remained in the community for an unspecified period of time.

Such a great story with such a nice happy ending! But part of me thinks the faith community of Joppa was so dependent upon Tabitha that they were to the point of co-dependency. Unlike Tabitha or Peter, I can't help but get the impression that the community is wanting in faith. If their faith was strong they would not fear life without

Tabitha. It is understandable that grief causes us to pull back and hope for a simple solution to our problems. Even so, moving forward without Tabitha appears to be inconceivable to this faith community.

With this thought in mind, the next logical question is, why was the community in such a flux? Did Tabitha fail to train up, to teach others, so that they could take on new roles within the life of the church? Was no one working along side her who could take up where she left off? Were the members of the faith community happy to let Tabitha do all the work, and so did not step up to learn or to try to take on new roles, new responsibilities, to help the ministry of the church to grow?

Based on what we know about how churches work, I would guess that it is probably a bit of both, failure to train or at least failure to encourage and build up confident leaders coupled with a reluctance on the part of others to stretch themselves, even if they are capable or have been prepared to take on new responsibilities. I am always amazed by the static that 80% of what happens in the life of a church is accomplished by less than 20% of its members.

And there are lots of reasons for this. There are too many churches where the old guard is unwilling to let go. Which is always a problem for newer members who are willing to help out, but don't know the tried and true way things have always been done. The result there is pushback from the old guard and resentment on the part of those who would like to become involved, but do not feel welcome.

With all the work done on hospitality these days, you would think this would no longer be an issue. Yet a colleague shared during our retreat this week, how a member, one that had coordinated the after church coffee fellowship for over three years, came up to her one Sunday morning and said, "I want you to know, this has nothing to do with you, but I am leaving the church." The woman walked away before the pastor could learn the reasons for her decision. That is until just recently when they happened to bump into each other at a coffee shop. When asked, the woman shared she had had enough of "them." "Them" being the table of six who every Sunday complained about the quality of the coffee, the quality of the refreshments, and how horrible it was that they were now being asked for donations to keep the coffee flowing. They never once offered to help. They never once offered to bring in refreshments. They never said thank you to this woman who felt that tending to the coffee fellowship was her way of giving back to the church. That table of six were worse than back seat drivers as they were trying to steer the church through a form of back seat ministry where it is easier to criticize those who serve rather than roll up their sleeves finding ways to serve others.

The other thing that happens in churches, that also happens in our own lives, is a fear of change. Change, even change that we orchestrate, can cause us to panic, to

feel like our world is collapsing. And so rather than embrace change, we duck and cover or run away. Also there are those who believe they cannot fill the shoes of those who have gone before them, who are afraid of making a mistake. And so rather than take the lead, they stay behind the scenes, and wonder why the life of the church seems to be floundering.

We forget we have the best tool in the world to help us navigate change. That tool is our faith. Faith that what needs to happen will happen. Faith that God has given us the strength and the things we need to meet the challenges before us. Faith is knowing God is with us in the confusion and possible bruising that lies before us.

And yes, even if we have been in the church for decades, our faith can deepen and grow. Peter is a great example of this. Peter, the one who denied knowing Jesus three times. Peter the one who panicked when he realized he was walking on water and then fell into the sea when he took his eyes off of Jesus. Peter who hid with the other disciples after Jesus' death and who was not sure what to make of the empty tomb. Peter, whose faith had grown so that he was now able to heal the sick, raise the dead, and be a support to those who were lost, dazed and confused.

Faith is not about clinging to the old ways. With faith we are able to move forward.

With all of the changes in the life of this church and in the life of the greater church looming before us, it is easy to lose faith. Rather let us follow Peter's example, growing in our faith, so that the life and spirit of this community of faith remains strong and vital and ever ready to go where God is calling. Which means everyone, to the best of their abilities, is working and praying, worshipping and serving together, so that all will be living witnesses to the God's mercy and grace, mercy and grace for all. Amen