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Spirit Life: Peace

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Frosty Westering turned kindness into an art form. Forrest Edward "Frosty" Westering was a legendary football coach at three schools, including my alma mater, Pacific Lutheran University, in Tacoma, Washington. He compiled a college football coaching career record of 305-96-7. In his 41 years of coaching, he never had a losing season. Frosty led his teams to eight national championships, winning four. He retired in 2003 as the ninth winningest coach in college football history, and in 2019, ESPN ranked Frosty 39th on the list of the "150 Greatest Coaches in College Football."

I didn't play football for Frosty. But because I did play the trumpet in the Lute Pep Band for all of the home games, I can honestly say, "I played for Frosty." I don't remember a single piece of music we played, but I'll never forget what Frosty taught his players: "In the game of life when someone gets knocked down, you be the first one to help them back up." Helping people up when they are down, being aware of the needs of others, showing compassion, welcoming strangers. These are all acts of kindness. And Frosty Westering was an authentically kind man.

It was well known that Frosty was far more interested in shaping players' lives and influencing their hearts and minds than in the actual game of football. That wasn't just theoretical; it was practical. The way that looked on the field was nothing short of remarkable. Frosty's players didn't swear, push, fight or trash-talk. They never danced in the end zone, they never taunted another player, they never raised fingers toward heaven to proclaim that they're No. 1. They were too busy helping their teammates to their feet. Not only that, and even more remarkably, Frosty was clear about how to play the game. After tackling an opposing player, Frosty's players would routinely help their opponents back up and even compliment them on their performance. There were some, of course, who thought that it was all just a psych job, but really, the players were just being the kind of people Frosty had taught them to be.

Frosty was a Christ-follower. Those of us who had the honor of knowing him heard him say often that his coach was a rabbi who lived a couple of thousand years ago, his teammates were other seekers, followers, and disciples, and that the ancient scriptures were his playbook. In that playbook, in those ancient words there is a passage of scripture that briefly details a woman by the name of Dorcas, also known as Tabitha, also known as Gazelle, also known as "Gracious." When I read the story of Tabitha in Acts 9, I just use the name that describes her best: Grace.

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas [which in our language is Gracious, or Grace]. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time, she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay."

So, Peter got up and went with them, and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them.

Peter put them all outside, then knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then, calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. (Acts 9:36-24)

We're in the very heart of an important series that we're calling Spirit Life. We've been learning that from the beginning of time, God's intention for humankind is that we would cultivate and then bear the fruit of the Spirit, which leads to the generosity of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We met Esther, who harnessed the power of self-control to bring about a generosity of freedom for her people. We met Ruth and Naomi, who tapped into the generosity of the fruit of patience with each other and others that created

life-giving relationships. We learned about Zacchaeus and his search for more of the fruit of peace in his life, so he seeks out Jesus.

This week, we are encountering Tabitha. And the story of Tabitha is a story of resurrection, but with a big twist. Tabitha's story shows us how kindness leads ordinary people to do ordinary things, creating extraordinary generosity in the world. We don't know much about her. The seven verses in Acts 9 hardly tell a whole life's story, but we learn a few things about Tabitha from this passage that help us learn a few things about ourselves when it comes to kindness. She has a lot to teach us. Let me make a couple of observations.

First, Tabitha was a disciple. She was a disciple of Jesus. Verse 36: "In Joppa, there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek, her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor." Somewhere along the way, Tabitha had heard about Jesus. Her commitment and devotion to him earned her the title of disciple. This same commitment and devotion drove her to great kindness, motivated by God's love in her life.

Second, Tabitha's discipleship made an impact in her community. The kind of love we experience because God first loved us should drive us to action. It certainly did for Tabitha. So much so that when she became sick and died, and when the disciples sent for Peter to see if there was anything he could do, who do we find surrounding her deathbed? She is surrounded by the very people she had shown kindness to by making them robes and other clothing. Her kindhearted ways gained her much credibility and respect in the community. When she died, the people of Joppa grieved deeply.

Third, as a disciple of Jesus, Tabitha realized that one way to bring about the generosity of the kingdom of God was to use her natural abilities in acts of ministry. She just used what she had and did what she was good at to create a generous place in her community. Tabitha was good with a needle and thread. So, what better way to serve the mission of the kingdom of God than keeping the local widows in respectable clothing.

That's how kindness works. It's not about gigantic acts of kindness that bring all kinds of recognition, but rather all the ways we help one another

because it's the right thing to do. Because we've learned the best way to love Jesus is to love others. We do that when we cook a meal for a friend who's going through a rough time, dealing with loss and grief, walking through the valley of the shadow of death. We love Jesus when we open a door for someone behind us who has their arms full. We love Jesus when we send a thoughtful card in the mail to someone who could use a pick-me-up. We love Jesus when we make a call to someone we haven't seen in church for a few weeks. We love Jesus when we express kindness by picking up a gift for someone just because they were on our minds. Take a moment to think of all the little things you do. Now, think about the things people do for you. They matter. Kindness matters. So, let's make this sticky. The story of Tabitha provides some clear insights into living into generous kindness.

Use the gifts you've been given to help others.

Tabitha – also known as Grace had talent for designing, tailoring and stitching. She put that to good use, making clothing for people who needed it. Any ability can be utilized to help others in very personal and practical ways. Cooking baking for a neighbor who is sick or dealing with difficulties. Writing a note of encouragement to a local teacher or a doctor, a nurse, a technician or a volunteer at the hospital across the street.

Build relationships that will have lasting impact on others. When Tabitha, also known as Grace, died, she left a legacy. She touched many lives and made many friends. As the people in Joppa gathered, they grieved deeply for the loss of someone they valued. If we give thought to how we will be remembered, it might change our priorities now. Do we care about what God cares about? Do we seek to show agape love to those around us? Do we look for ways to connect with and support others?

Let your life speak. Tabitha, also known as Grace, was called a disciple, which means she was intentional about following Jesus with everything she had. She knew that Jesus called people to give, to care, and to provide where they could, to express generous kindness. She had shown many people God's love. But her death and return to life pointed even more directly to the Lord. There was certainly great rejoicing when she was restored, as

well as celebrating God's wondrous work. We have a chance to tell the stories of how God is working in and through our lives and the life of this congregation. We serve a big God who delights in showing kindness himself. Especially in this story! Imagine the wonder and delight those disciples and widows experienced when Peter called them into the home a short time later, and there was their beloved Tabitha, alive and well!

The point of this story isn't that Tabitha was dead and came back to life. If this was just a story about a rabbi who performed a miracle in Joppa, we might be satisfied just watching cheering on Jesus like we cheer on our favorite sports stars. "Way to go, Jesus! Hey, I'm gonna go get a hotdog! You want one?" The point of this story is that by embracing the call to develop the fruit of the spirit in our lives fills us with the resurrection life of Christ and when that happens, we bring kindness to the world that helps the world come to life.

Frosty Westering modeled that for me and thousands of others who never played football, or an instrument in the band. And because of that, I'll never forget what Frosty taught his players: "In the game of life when someone gets knocked down, you be the first one to help them back up." Helping people up when they are down, being aware of the needs of others, showing compassion, welcoming strangers. These are all acts of kindness.