

“Standing Together”

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If you know me very well, you know that I absolutely love Harry Potter. I started reading Harry Potter when the books first came out, because they came out when our daughter was the same age as Harry. It was kind of a fun read to read through.

If you have read it, you know this. It will be a little spoiler alert if you haven't read it yet - but it's not the whole thing so don't get upset. I love the last book. In the story Harry Potter dies, if you remember that part.

When Harry dies, he goes up to what we can only assume is Heaven. He is met there by his Professor Dumbledore, and they sit and they talk for a moment. I won't get into all that but, at one point, Professor Dumbledore asks Harry if he wants to leave this wonderful place where he is out of pain and suffering, and go back to the chaos of the world that he is in the middle of; because it was Lord Voldemort who killed him, and Lord Voldemort who is going to be there when he gets back. “Or,” Professor Dumbledore asks, “Do you want to stay up here?” Harry, very courageously decides to return to earth to face his enemy and hopefully make change in the world in which he lives.

It was such a powerful moment in the movies, and in that book. I talk about it today because so many people mourn death. This is what happened to Tabitha. She had died, and all of these people mourned her because she had done so many wonderful things. But we as people of faith, as Christian people, shouldn't be mourning when someone passes away who had faith. We should be rejoicing for them because they are out of pain, they are beyond suffering, they are literally wrapped in the loving arms of God. That world is so much better than the one in which we live.

Now that doesn't mean you can't shed tears - because you can shed them for yourselves and how much you miss that person. You can feel that sense of loss and that vacuum where you know that your life will never be the same, because of the impact that they have had upon you. But your tears should always simply be for you - never for them - because they are free.

So it isn't for Tabitha's sake that God through Apostle Peter's hand healed her, because she is going to turn around and die a second time, now. It is almost cruel. She isn't saved for eternity on earth. She will die again. So it wasn't for Tabitha that Peter brought her back from death to life; it was to show that the power of God is in their midst. Just because Jesus died and was resurrected and ascended into Heaven doesn't mean that Jesus' power, his healing ability, his whole Holy Spirit isn't still on earth. It is still being used. That power of Jesus resided in the Apostles and Disciples that God had blessed with the ability to do the work of Jesus Christ on earth. In the same way that the power of the Holy Spirit did not leave with Jesus' resurrection and ascension; so, too, when Peter and the other Apostles died, the Holy Spirit remained and worked through people of faith.

So it is very important when you become a member of a Church, when you claim faith, when you are baptized, that you too are part of the gift of the Holy Spirit. You all - as

confirmed people of today - received the power of the Holy Spirit that is not unlike that which Jesus possessed and that Peter possessed.

But I want to tell you a little bit more about Tabitha. She was a marginalized figure. She was marginalized because she was a woman and, in that day and age, a woman was just ahead of a slave, but not by much. She was a widow.

Now today we kind of like widows, but people didn't take care of widows then. They didn't have money. They didn't have insurance policies when their spouse died. They couldn't go to work like the men could. They didn't have social security or any other benefits, so oftentimes widows would starve to death, unless their family would care enough to feed them a little something. Many were hungry a lot of the time. They were marginalized worse.

She was also marginalized within the greater society for being a follower of Jesus Christ, and she was marginalized by the Romans and by the Jews, because they were a sect or a separate group from these other larger religious societies.

She didn't have a hope in the world and, yet, when she died, people from all over the world mourned her so much so, that they called Peter, and brought Peter back to try and do something for her.

You know that she was powerful. Not only did they give her Aramaic name, which would have been for a small group of people within a village, and called her Tabitha, but they used her Greek name of Dorcas. The only reason they used that name would have been to show that the people who didn't speak Aramaic, but spoke Greek, would also mourn her and need to know.

It would have been like an obituary where you put two different names, if you were one nationality, and you had another language that you spoke in another nationality. That many people knew you, and mourned you, and felt your loss.

How could a woman, a woman, a widow and somebody from this sect that nobody really liked become so special? Because of her good works. She cared for people. The other widows couldn't help but show all of the clothing she had made for them; all of the things she had done. The difference she had made even though she was a woman, even though she was a person of faith, even though she was a widow. She still did so much that she changed the world around her - it was truly amazing.

You might remember this story. It got a lot of play about five years ago. There was a reporter by the name of Lara Logan. She was with CBS news, and was very, very good as a foreign correspondent for the news.

She happened to be in Cairo, Egypt, on February 11, 2011. That was a very pivotal day, because it was the outbreak of the Muslim Spring; and there were riots and parades and everything you could imagine happening. With Cairo being one of the most dense, largest cities in the world, it was chaos. She [Lara] got separated from her camera man and her producer. All of a sudden she was surrounded by all of these men in the mob and they grabbed her and treated her violently. They [members of the mob] threw her around and

passed her all over. Suddenly they were just tearing her apart. They threw her down, but they threw her by a group of women.

They were all covered up with, for lack of a better word “masks” with their head cover all over their body. Those women got up without even looking at each other. They just moved forward and, in that society, for a Muslim woman to even approach a man and to take men on would have been tantamount to sin – great, grievous sin.

But those women stepped around Lara and stood between Lara and the mob of men - literally hundreds of them - and would not let them get to her. They saved her life. In that moment those women knew what it was to be moral, to be ethical, to be faithful, and most of all courageous. It didn't matter that Lara was a different religion. It didn't matter. All that mattered to them was she was a person in need. Those few women took on an entire mob, and the men dispersed and walked away. They saved her life.

It is so profound to see what faith and what an impact faith can have, and not just on one life but on many; and sometimes your legacy is formed over time through hard work, and other times it is thrust upon you in a moment. And the question, is when that moment comes will you be prepared to take it, to do the right thing even against all odds?

Now today is your confirmation day, you guys. In some denominations confirmation is your first communion, but for us it is something different. In the Presbyterian Church we don't even have communion today. It's about membership in the life of the church, and that is a very profound statement for people who are just finishing 8th grade, because what we are saying is you are every bit an adult, as everyone else in the room.

Once you accept - you have already been approved by session - and once you say those words, and make that public affirmation, you will be considered an adult in the life of the Church.

Your vote at a congregational meeting, or anything else, counts just as much as your parents, and that could scare your parents right now. [Laughter] That is how important this is. So it is very important for you to realize that up until now you have just been kids. You have been a child and so, as children, you get away with a lot. You get forgiven for stuff.

You can play the cute little look, Zoë, that doesn't work now. Your mistakes are taken more seriously. Your privileges will be more and your responsibilities will be greater.

Now what that means is, starting today, as adults in the life of the Church, you begin the process of forming who you are going to be - making your legacy. And, you have to decide who you are going to be; what you are going to stand for. Are you going to be a bum, someone who denies God, someone who only cares about themselves? Or are you going to be someone like Tabitha, who everyone respected – admired – who cared more for others than herself, who sought the Holy Spirit because she knew that life would be hard? It was for her and I promise you, it will be hard for every single one of you at times in your life. Are you going to be ready and prepared?

Some people treat confirmation like it is the ending, a graduation. (Thank goodness I never have to go back.) But, confirmation is a beginning, because now you have learned to

become kids, and you have learned it well enough to get through confirmation. But all you have learned is to be kids. Those people who go to confirmation and then never go back to church have a faith life like that of a child, whether they are 17 years old or 90 years old. You have to continue [being active in the church] if you want to have an adult, mature faith. That will be your challenge now; and I pray, as does everyone in this room, that you will want to be adults - want to be mature - and begin the process of learning how to be and have an adult faith.

That will be our prayer for everyone else in the room as we pray for you this day. That is what it means to be confirmed. God is confirming upon them, that God knows them by name. God has fulfilled your baptism today. It's taken how many years and God is still working with you.

Kyle, it will take extra work for God to work on you [Laughter] - maybe more with Sam and a little bit more with Owen - but I'm telling you, it is tough. But God is still working in you. God is the one who brought you here today. It isn't a graduation; it is a new beginning.

By worldly standards, Tabitha didn't have a thing. You guys have so much. You have parents who love you. You have a Church that loves you, you have brains (even though 5 of the 6 of you like math, which cannot be very smart). [Laughter] What is their favorite subject? The only one with brains said, "Lunch." The other five said, "Math." We need to pray extra hard for them.

Tabitha was given respect. She was rich in faith, respect and dignity. You can't buy faith, respect and dignity - you can only earn it and have it given to you by God. If you stick with your faith, you will be respected, you will be faithful and you will have dignity. Keep with your faith and God will do great things in and through you. May the rest of us pray for them, today and always?

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen