

Noticing Details

Details are all those numerous small things which go together to make up a whole—whether it is a story or a picture. The world of art has many terms to describe the various ways artists put paint on canvas to create the image they wish to convey—from very precise executions to blurry impressions—but the details of each style give meaning to the painting. The world of digital photography makes this even clearer because the picture is formed by dots and it is the number of dots per inch which determines the clarity of the picture—so when the number of pixels or dots per frame so clearly defines the image the importance of details also becomes clearer. The details which an author gives us when setting the scene in a narrative just as we begin reading a novel tells us a great deal about what to expect as the story unfolds—about the characters involved, about the possible directions that the plot may take often depends upon the clues given about the details in the description of the neighborhood in which the characters live. We notice details as we go about our daily lives—it is the details we notice which help us navigate and make decisions about how we are going to react to those people that are coming toward us on the street. But sometimes when what we are encountering is very familiar, we stop noticing the details. Or on other occasions, if we only look on the surface, we may not see a true picture. Last week one of the passages we read was also from the book of Acts. In fact, it was also from chapter 9, the first few verses. I only read first the part of the chapter which described the encounter of Saul of Tarsus with the risen Jesus on the Damascus Road and the question which the Lord posed to him at that time. The results of that encounter are well known. Saul was blinded, then was led into Damascus where he fasted and prayed for three days before God sent a Christ believer to him. Basically the first twenty two verses of this chapter related the total upheaval of Saul's life—his conversion from a persecutor of Christ's followers to an Apostle of Christ sent out to convert others. The details of this narrative are clear and concise—easy to see and follow—easy to recognize as a major upheaval—drastic change in the understanding and life of the one whose life is depicted. What is not so clear in the passage from Acts that forms today's reading is that the upheaval occurring in Peter's life also involves changes of major proportions. Peter, although a disciple of Jesus is a Palestinian Jew with traditional understanding of Jewish culture and laws. When we last had news of Peter in the lectionary, he had journeyed back to Galilee to resume fishing according to John's gospel. We will find that Acts will take up Peter's story at a

different point on Pentecost in a couple of weeks with Luke's description of the effect of the arrival of the Holy Spirit. That takes Peter from the fearful disciple to the preaching leader of the forming church. Today's lesson from Acts occurs after Pentecost, after the arrival of the Holy Spirit and after Peter has taken up his assignment of "tending the sheep" which Jesus has asked of him. In Acts 9: 32 we read: "Now as Peter went here and there among all the believers, he came down also to the saints living in Lydda." In Lydda Peter heals a man who has been paralyzed and bedridden for eight years, by telling him to get up in the name of Jesus Christ. This causes all the residents of Lydda and nearby Sharon, Jewish settlements to turn to the Lord. Notice how specific these verses are as to locals and people. It was very important to the early church to document the growth of the church; not only in number but who they were because of the growing inclusiveness geographically, culturally, and ethnically by naming them so that they were known. These details no longer resonate with us, but these individual's life stories were known and shared. That was gospel—good news. The details in Acts continues with verse 36: "Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas." Both the Greek and the Aramaic are given because Joppa was not strictly a Jewish community but a Hellenistic one. Although geographically close, Lydda and Joppa, culturally are not. But evidently there were some Christ believers among the residents of Joppa, and this woman is known and loved for her good and faithful works as a disciple among them, so it seems logical that her community would send for Peter. What we read of this woman is that she was devoted to good works and acts of charity, and two men were sent to Peter with a request that he come without delay to the aid of this disciple. The details we miss in our reading has to do with the difference in the languages used; between English and Greek. All Greek nouns have gender while except for proper nouns like names, English ones don't. We know that this disciple was a woman because her name is given, but the detail we don't see is that the feminine form for disciple is used in the Greek document. To us, that a woman is considered a disciple would not be odd. Although there are still forms of Christianity where the role of a woman is restricted, in many it is not, but at the time of the writing of these documents, it would have been unusual for a woman to be given equal status with a man. The masculine form of the Greek word for disciple is the consistent form used throughout the gospel accounts, so it seems there are changes taking place in the roles of the believers. The Jewish tradition was highly patriarchal and roles for women were limited, yet here it seems there is a woman who is a disciple who is holding a significant role in the community.

When Peter is summoned, Dorcas is gravely ill, when he arrives, she has died. Again, Peter performs a miracle through prayer and she is restored to life; the news spread throughout Joppa and many more come to believe in the Lord. The story of this disciple was important to the early church to remember so they recorded it—her life was important—her role in the community was important enough to send for their leader. Her life was important enough for Peter to ask for intervention and for it to be granted. The final verse of this passage sticks in this little comment without explanation: “Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.” This is another little detail which can pass without notice—Peter stays for some time in the home of a certain Simon, and the detail which is given about him is not one that indicates his ethnicity—with that name, he is probably also Jewish, not Gentile. We can probably assume that since Peter stays with him that he is also a follower of Christ, and a member of the Christian community in Joppa, but that detail is not given. No. What we are given is his occupation—he is a tanner. He is someone whose occupation is the handling of dead animals—he is ritually unclean according to Jewish law. And Peter is staying in his home. The details which the early church felt important to record were important because they knew those people and how their stories showed their acceptance into the body of Christ demonstrated to others that they were indeed the bearers of the good news which Jesus had brought—that in their community the reign of God had come near. Although on the surface when we read these verses we may not see the changes and upheaval in Peter’s understanding of how he was to in community but the Holy Spirit was obviously active and moving in an ever widening area in his life and that of the community he was leading. There is another detail which it seems appropriate to point out from this passage. I mentioned that Dorcas was given the honor of being called a disciple in the text, and how unusual that designation was for a woman. The text also gives us the detail which tells us why she was a disciple—she was devoted to good works and acts of charity. She was not a disciple because of her preaching, but because of her many acts of kindness—all the small details of her life which showed her love for others which her love for her Lord. Dorcas as a disciple stands for the small stuff of church life that really matters. When other translations of Dorcas’s acts of discipleship are consulted the same verse reads this way: She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. (NRS); this woman was full of good works and kind acts that she was doing; (YLT), a woman who was always doing good and helping the poor; (NIV) this woman was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity, which she continually did; (NAS) Her life was full of

good works and ministries of charity. (MIT); a friend translated it as she was abounding in acts of compassionate love. There is no denying that some of the big stuff like our theology matters as well, but the fact is that the church of Jesus Christ would have been dead as a doornail ages ago if all we had to offer is sound theology. What Dorcas offered was and has always been essential to the life of the church and the spreading of the faith. Fine architecture is nice, but great buildings can serve all sorts of purposes. Great liturgical music matters, but again, great music can be inspiring without being based in formal worship. The irony of all the things that we think that are important to the church is this; it is not just the great ideas, the stunning art, the wonderful music and all the other big things done that has kept the church alive. For the last two thousand years, it is all the unsung gracious and loving disciples of the church who with their endless and often unnoticed gratuitous graces and unnecessary kindnesses who have given life to the faith. And it is still those small acts of kindness and grace, those little details of giving warmth into a world where fear and hostility are the more likely response—it is those small details of the way we live our daily lives which are noticed by others. It is those details which witness most strongly to the presence of the risen Lord. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.