

SERMON TITLE: "Sewing for Life" ("Fifty Days for the Earth" Series)
SERMON TEXT: Acts 9:36-43
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: May 10, 2020 (Mother's Day) at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

During this 50-day season between Easter and Pentecost, I've been preaching a series of sermons that reflect not only our Christian belief in the resurrection but also our responsibility in regard to the revitalization of the earth. In honor of the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, it seemed like a good idea to spend these 50 days connecting our faith with the Mother Earth upon which God created us. As I pondered resurrection and earth and then added in Mother's Day to the mix, I came up with the Bible story that Steve read to us from Acts chapter nine. The scripture doesn't tell us that Tabitha, who was also known as Dorcas, was a mother, but chances are pretty good that she was. This woman in the early Christian movement was certainly one who provided for and nurtured her community, specifically with her sewing of clothes.

I know for many of us, sewing is an activity we can associate with our own mothers and the mothering we have done for our families. I think sewing also has some lessons to teach us about a life of faith on this planet. So, this morning, I invite you to become engaged in sewing for life.

1—THE WORDS SEW, SOW, SO—BEGIN WITH SOW

First of all, let's begin with the vocabulary. The word "sew" also sounds like the word "sow," which means to plant. And "S-E-W" also sounds like "so" spelled "S-O," which is used to indicate meaning. We're going to get to all these. But S-O-W is really where a lot of sewing begins.

Think about your cotton T-shirt, made from cotton picked from plants that grow from seeds. In Bible times, there was no cotton in Israel. What Dorcas had available to her was linen, which is made from flax. Flax is another plant that is grown from seeds sown in the ground. When the plants are mature, they're harvested, and the dried stalks are then broken in a certain way that allows for the inner

fibers to be freed and cleaned up. The technical vocabulary is that the harvested flax is retted, dried, broken, scutched, hackled, and spun into thread. Then it's finally woven into linen cloth. Before or after weaving, the linen fibers might be dipped into dye, which sometimes has been made from red beets, blue and purple berries, orange carrots, and other vegetables, fruits, and plants.

I have some show-and-tell things to share with you today. Here's my Pit game which I've had since I was a kid. This game about trading different kinds of grain shares is what reminded me that linen comes from flax, which is a grain.

These next items come from Guatemala. When I was on a mission trip there some years ago, I enjoyed seeing how threads were dyed in big barrels using plants for the colors. Each region of Guatemala is famous for its own particular weaving pattern. I bought this fabric from a weaver and brought it home and sewed this skirt. These are some clergy stoles that were made in Guatemala by a women's collective known as the Ruth & Naomi Project. That Methodist ministry was started as a way to help women earn a living after their husbands had been killed in Guatemala's very long civil war.

Some clothing is made from animal sources. Furs and leather come from hides, which require the death of the animals. Other cloth is made from renewable fur of live animals. That's how people have been able to spin wool from sheep, goats, llamas, alpacas, muskoxen, camels, and even rabbits. When my cat is doing her spring shedding, sometimes I've wondered if I could spin that! Silk is made from the fibers of silkworm cocoons. Polyester, nylon, and spandex are manufactured from non-renewable fossil fuels. But probably most of our clothing comes from plant seeds that were sown, S-O-W-N, in the ground.

2--SEW

Acts 9 doesn't tell us if Dorcas grew the flax and spun, dyed, and wove it all by herself, or if someone else did that work. But, after she had the cloth in hand, then she went to work making

clothing for the people of her community. So, let's consider the actual activity of sewing. To S-E-W usually involves "a needle pulling thread," as Maria sang in *The Sound of Music*.

Over the past weeks of our COVID-19 situation, I know many of you have been sewing cloth facemasks. I've set up my sewing station here. There are a lot of different ways to make these masks. But one that seems pretty standard works like this. You start with 100% cotton fabric. It can be brand new material never used before, or, like me, you can cut up an old shirt that's been hanging in your closet. You cut the fabric into two rectangles 9"x 6". You cut two pieces of elastic 7" long for a medium size or 6" long for a smaller size. You need a sewing machine, a spool of thread, some pins, and an ironing board helps. I won't take the time to demonstrate, but there are lots of YouTube videos available, including a hilarious one where the woman cuts her fingers and sews her sleeve into the mask. So watch out for that!

If you don't have the materials or the skill to sew a mask, there are instructions available for no-sew masks too. You can use a bandana, a scarf, or cut up a rectangle of an old T-shirt. Fold it up with two rubber bands, and you now have a mask that will allow you entry into stores and other public places. For safety reasons, we aren't in any rush to resume in-person worship services here at our First UMC sanctuary. But whenever we do, you might need a mask then. So, now's a good time to begin thinking about how to make one for yourself. Or maybe you could put in a request to our church, and possibly someone from our congregation will volunteer to sew one for you, like Dorcas sewed clothing for members of her community.

3—SO

Earlier I explained that the sound of "sew" can be "S-O-W" like planting seeds, or "S-E-W" like creating with a needle and thread. That same sound can also be "S-O" like what something means, implies, or the result that occurs. When we look at the Dorcas story in Acts 9, we see that her sewing was much appreciated by the people of her community. Verse 36 tells us that she was devoted to good

works and acts of charity, so it's quite likely that Dorcas had generously given away items of clothing free of charge. Or, maybe she sold her handicraft at a reduced cost. Perhaps she was also honored at her death because of the tremendous skill and quality of her seamstress work. However it was, the widows who gathered around weeping and showing off the clothing that Dorcas had made certainly held her in high regard. Dorcas had sewn with a purpose. She had sewn in love, and she was loved and honored because of what her sewing meant to her widowed friends.

What I'm trying to say is that—for Dorcas and her community—sewing had purpose and meaning. And, I think our lives need to have purpose and meaning too. When we die, hopefully there will be people who gather around us to both weep and eagerly celebrate the good things that we have done.

This Bible story doesn't simply speak of grief rituals, however. Verses 40 and 41 tell us that, when Peter knelt and prayed, Dorcas opened her eyes and sat up from her deathbed. Peter then helped her stand up and showed the saints and widows that Dorcas was alive. Because this story comes from a very different culture and time, it raises more questions than it answers. I'm sure we would tell it quite a bit differently if these events happened today. But no matter how we might try to explain it, we know this is a story about God's resurrection power. It's a story about revival, rejuvenation, and the renewing of life in the context of Christian faith.

And that's a concept we need to have now, in the 21st century. As greenhouse gases are increasingly warming our earth; as ice, drought, and flooding change; as plants, insects, and animal species are endangered; we humans need to do our part to turn this deadly situation around. As a people who follow a risen savior, we need to be a people who believe in resurrection. We need to be a people who get down on our knees and pray for life to be restored. We need to be a people who put out our hand to help lift life back onto its feet. If we're grateful for the abundant years we have had and—if we mourn the loss of air, water, land, and temperature qualities that are needed to sustain life for

our grandchildren and great grandchildren—then we need to put our minds and hearts now toward the restoration of our earth.

As the young people would tell us, there isn't much purpose or point in anything we do unless life will be possible in 30, 50, and 100 years. If the word "so," S-O, tells us about meaning and implications, we have to ask ourselves, "SO, what are we going to do?"

CONCLUSION

As I was thinking about all these ways of sewing for life, I recalled the environmental symbol "Reduce, Recycle, Reuse." We all know how this makes good sense. If we can reduce the amount of stuff we consume, we'll use a lot less fossil fuel energy and raw materials. We can collectively consume less by recycling some things--although, we've sadly discovered that the recycling process isn't always functioning. Reusing, though, is something we do have more control over. So, I'm going to close by reminding you of two movies that tell about this power we have to sew for life.

Remember Scarlett O'Hara in the 1939 movie *Gone with the Wind*? Do you remember how the Civil War had decimated her family plantation and how they were desperate to eat and make a living? Do you remember that, at one point, Scarlett pulls down the draperies from the windows so she can sew herself an elegant green dress and not appear so poor?

Another story of re-using or re-purposing is in the 1965 movie *The Sound of Music*. In that story, the new governess Maria thinks that the seven Von Trapp children in her charge need some clothes that they can play in. When the children's father says that such fabric would be an unnecessary expenditure, Maria takes down the curtains from the windows and sews clothes from them. Now free to run, bicycle, sing, and row a boat, the children and Maria embrace life.

Sow a seed in the ground. **Sew** a mask for your face. Reduce, recycle, and reuse, **so** humanity will continue on this earth. That's the resurrection story of sewing for life.