

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from April 25, 2010

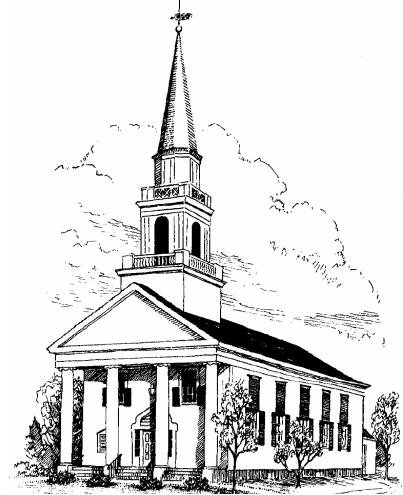
Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

“Saved by the Judges”

Scriptures:

Psalm 23

Acts 9:36-43



Let's talk about Big Mike. Do you all know who Big Mike is? For those of you who don't, Big Mike is one of the current finalists on this season's television show *American Idol*. [By the way, over the past 18 months, since arriving as your pastor, we have referred to several television shows here, including *Survivor* and *Say Yes to the Dress*, and I think we may have mentioned *American Idol* here before, too. Now, either God is truly speaking to us through our contemporary media, or your pastor is watching way too much TV!]

But, back to Big Mike. Beginning with a nationwide search in-between seasons, *American Idol* selects a dozen very talented young singers to compete on the show for a series of several weeks. They sing before a panel of 4 judges on TV each week and are frankly critiqued after each performance. At the end of each week's show, the nationwide television audience is invited to telephone or text in their vote for their favorite performer. The performer receiving the least amount of votes each week is then dropped from the competition. So no matter how good or bad the judges think the performer is, it's the popular vote by the millions in America that determines who will finally be this year's *American Idol*.

Except in the case of Big Mike. Because once per season the judges get to issue a "save." A performer may have received the least amount of votes and be next in line to be kicked off the show, but if the judges deem it so, they may save one performer once to continue on in the competition. This season they saved Big Mike.

Big Mike has been compared to a big teddy bear. Physically, he is a very large muscle bound African American man, married with a baby, with an easy smile and a gentle manner and he sings very well, and always from the heart. But he's probably not going to be this year's *American Idol*. If you read the music reviews, his style is a little predictable, sometimes bordering on boring, and truth be told, his musical genre and maybe even his persona will not sell a lot of records.

So why did the judges decide to save him? Super nice guy? Pleasant enough voice? A chance to show they know more about musical talent than most of America? Or is there another motive? Perhaps they wanted to retain musical diversity on the show – he's not a rocker

like some, or a blues artist, but more contemporary pop. In the same vein, maybe they didn't want to lose certain demographic groups from the viewing audience over the next several weeks. It might impact ratings. Why save Big Mike?

Similarly, why Tabitha? Why raise Tabitha? Called Dorcas by the Greeks and for whom many local Christian women's ministries have been named. Why raise Dorcas? We can imagine there may have been hundreds, if not thousands, of people available and worthy of Peter's prayer. Why Tabitha?

If we dig a little into the research that has been done on the role of women in the formation of the early church, especially widows, we may not be able to answer our question definitively, but we may be able to deepen our understanding of the significance of Peter's raising Tabitha from the dead.

Biblical commentator Lucinda Brown informs us that "in the ancient world the term widow was fairly inclusive, designating any woman who lacked male protection or support." A widow could have been someone whose husband had died, or a divorced woman (remember at that time, only men could divorce women), or a woman who had never even married but was no longer under her father's protection. They were the objects of charity, unprotected by standard means of support, and as we have read before, without rights and sometimes exploited. As far as the social structure was concerned, widows and orphans were at the bottom.

But as we see in this morning's passage, a lot of them stuck together. And biblical as well as historical research reveals that they were significant agents of the early expansion of Christianity. While most agree that Tabitha herself was probably a widow, there is disagreement among commentators about whether or not she was a woman of independent means supporting local widows out of her own resources or whether she, too, was of humble origin, especially given her work with textiles, and, like the others, was responsible for her own support.

Whatever her economic circumstances, it is clear that she was a key figure in the early church. She is the only woman in the New Testament who is referred to directly as a disciple. And as a disciple, she would have studied and followed Jesus' teachings and confessed Jesus as Lord and, like other widows in the early church, would have taught and led others, spreading the good news from household to household. Lucinda Brown goes on to write that "Tabitha's death would have been a tragic loss to the [early] church at Joppa...because of her role as a devout and faithful member, perhaps even leader, of the early Christian community."

So, upon her death, Peter is called immediately from the nearby town of Lydda to Joppa. "Please come to us without delay." And he does. It is not clear from the scripture that he has been summoned specifically to come and raise Tabitha from the dead. Please come to us without delay. A cherished, devoted, loved, active, giving, influential member of our community has died. She was important to us and the work of our movement. She will be sorely missed. We're not sure what the future of the church will be in Joppa now that she's gone. Please come to us without delay.

Peter arrives and he wishes to be alone with the body. He puts all of them outside and

he prays. He kneels down and he prays. He kneels down and prays before he turns to the body. And we wonder this morning what was his prayer? Peter, the one whom Jesus called rock, upon whom I will build my church. Peter the one who had gone through so much with his rabbi Jesus, who was now his foremost voice on earth, continuing his message, showing signs and wonders like his Master had done. What did he pray?

Did he pray: Your will, not mine? Or did he pray as we do at a death, Lord, we commend the spirit of our sister Tabitha to your realm? Did he recite the 23rd Psalm of his ancestor David? Or was it out of compassion, Lord, look at these weeping widows and have mercy on them and this house? Or, Lord, have mercy on me in my grief; I have lost a close colleague, a sister in Christ? Or, Lord, if we, your servants, lose Tabitha now at this time in this place, we may have serious problems? What did Peter pray? What did Peter pray that evoked the divine answer for him to turn to her body and say, “Tabitha, get up”?

We read: “This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.”

We don't know what Peter prayed anymore than we know what went through the minds of the judges, or the TV executives of *American Idol*, who decided to save Big Mike. But the answer to both is clear: Don't give up. In the face of what appears to be the end, there can be miracles. The story is not over.

Jesus raised Lazarus on purpose several days after his death. He intentionally hung back two days after hearing of his friend's death and when he showed up at Lazarus' tomb, he prayed: “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.”

After doubting Thomas sees Jesus resurrected, the author of the Gospel of John writes: “these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

Friends, God's raising Tabitha through Peter, if nothing else, tells us that the story is not over when we think it is. It was not over in Joppa. It is not over here. Tabitha eventually did die, but millions more have carried on her good works in the name of Christ, many right here in our midst. Big Mike will not become the next American Idol, but he will always sing. And we don't understand the purposes of God, even in hindsight. But through Jesus' resurrection and the resulting grace and forgiveness we receive, each day each one of us is given another chance at this life in the most unexpected ways, no matter how many popular votes we may be missing. And at the end of this life, when we might think the story is over, through our belief and the mercy and love and compassion of our Almighty Judge, we are saved, not kicked off the stage, but safe for eternity in the everlasting arms of God. Alleluia and Amen.

