

Woven Together
Acts 9:36-42
May 5, 2024
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Sewing is a labor of love. It takes care, skill, attention to detail, and time. Even if it's something simple like replacing a button, you have to pay attention, you have to watch the needle and thread as you pull them through each hole, going back and forth and under and over until the button is secure. Sewing multiple fabrics together is an intricate labor of love, one that requires even more care, skill, attention to detail, and time.

Three years ago, I heard a knock on my office door at the church I was serving. Two church members, a mother and daughter, came in and they had a big bundle in their arms, and said, "We have a gift for you." This was the first church I worked at out of divinity school. This is the church that ordained me, and my time there was coming to an end and I was getting married a couple months later. The office space had a big conference table and they laid the bundle on top of the table and began to unfold it. As they unfolded it they told me it was a tradition in their family to make and gift a quilt to the women when they were getting married, and that they wanted me to have one.

On the table before me laid a beautiful hand-sewn quilt. The quilt has 20 modern Greek crosses each a different a color, there is a quadrant of multi-colored triangles that surrounds each cross, the border is made up of beautiful flowers, the back of the quilt is a mixture of blues and greens that evokes imagery of the planet earth. The stitching for the quilting itself is intricate with waves and swirls throughout. They had made it together. The daughter had helped pick the fabric and cut it. The mother had done everything else. On the back she sewed a piece of fabric that said, "Given with much love. One of a kind. Handmade work of art. Modern Greek cross quilt made for Leigh Curl and Keith Dove on the occasion of their marriage."

The modern Greek cross unlike the more traditional crosses we see and think of is symmetrical with four even arms. The modern Greek cross symbolizes the church, the arms reaching out—North, South, East, and West—all around it into the world to spread Jesus' gospel of love, justice, and liberation. With each piece of fabric the daughter cut out and each stitch the mother wove, it was a prayer, a hope, a blessing for us and for the churches, communities, and places yet to come that we would serve.

The quilt is one of the most beautiful, meaningful, and personal gifts I have ever received. On the difficult days, I wrap up in it and it brings comfort. On the cold and rainy days, it brings warmth. On the hot days, when I need something wrapped around me, it has that magic ability that quilts do to somehow keep me cool. On the days when beauty and goodness seem hard to find, the quilt shows me that both are abundant. The quilt is a reminder that no matter what happens, no matter where I go, there is a community that I will in one way or another forever be woven together with and they are holding me and the church I serve in prayer.

With each fabric Tabitha cut out and each stitch she wove on the widows' tunics, it was a prayer, a hope, a blessing for them. She knew them. She knew their lives, what they had gone through, what they were still going through, and knew the types of tunics they would need. The older woman who never married and lived a few streets over needed a thicker tunic, because her home got drafty in the colder months. The young woman who was just a few months into her pregnancy when her husband died needed a tunic that would cover her growing belly but wouldn't swallow her completely after she gave birth. The baby would likely need something to be wrapped up in too. She'd met a woman at the well whose husband had abandoned her, and she needed a tunic with quality fabric that wouldn't wear quickly when doing manual labor.

With each stitch, Tabitha wove her life together with the lives of the women. She wove their stories together. She wove their prayers together. She wove their hopes together. She wove promises and commitments to help each other shoulder their burdens and carry their loads.

In her debut novel, *The Mothers*, Brit Bennett tells the story of Nadia, a young Black woman raised in the church who leaves home to go to college and returns years later due to a family emergency. The book explores themes of Christianity in the context of the Black church, shame, and motherhood in various forms.

The novel begins from the perspective of the church mothers—the women who keep the church going doing the work that needs to be done, and who know and pray for everyone. As the mothers set up the story, they talk about the important job of praying for people:

“We don't think of ourselves as ‘prayer warriors.’ A man must have come up with that term—men think anything difficult is war. But prayer is more delicate than battle, especially intercessory prayer. More than just a notion, taking up the burdens of someone else, often someone you don't even know. You close your eyes and listen to a request. Then you have to slip inside their body. You are Tracy Robinson, burning for whiskey. You are Cindy Harris's husband, searching your wife's phone. You are Early Vernon, washing dirty knots out of your strung-out daughter's hair.

If you don't become them, even for a second, a prayer is nothing but words.”¹

Each stitch of each tunic was a prayer. No tunic exactly like another. Tabitha put herself in the lives of these women. The tunics needed to be more than just identical pieces of clothing given in mass to widows because of course all widows need a tunic! A tunic had to be “Given with much love. One of a kind. Handmade work of art.” to be more than a simple piece of clothing.

Widows in the bible, were not just a group of women widowed by the death of their spouse. Widows included women who were abandoned by their spouses, women who chose celibacy, old women, young women, and others. Just as the tunics could not be one-size-fits-all neither

¹ Brit Bennett, *The Mothers*, 38.

can we provide one singular definition of a widow, except to say that they were women in need. And in this case, they were women who also chose to follow Jesus.

When Tabitha dies and they send for Peter, the women gather around her with their tunics, the tunics that she had made for each of them individually. They gather not just to mourn and grieve their friend and their pastor, but to promise her that they would continue in the life-giving work of Jesus that she started among them. Tabitha is far from the only female disciple in the bible (after all, there is a whole group of disciples gathered around her death bed), but she is the only woman explicitly named as a disciple in the bible.

Tabitha devoted her life to the way of Jesus, serving those whom most overlooked, avoided, or judged. She took care and used her skill, attention to detail, and time, to weave her life together with these women. Each story and prayer they shared together was another stitch in the tunic. Each time they laughed together, each time they cried together, each time they broke bread together, each time they helped each other, each time they shouldered each other's burdens the seams along the tunic grew stronger. They were woven together in love and in following the way of Jesus.