

In the summer of 1971, I was digging in the dirt at Tell Qasile, near Tel Aviv, Israel. The site was a Philistine port city over 3000 years old. It was hard work, pick and shovel and bucket work.

Four feet deep we discovered bones and skulls. We were in a burial chamber. Ami Mazar, a graduate student in archeology and our leader, was very excited. He became a professor at the Institute of Archaeology of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

You know what I remember from those long days on the dig? Not the names of the other two students digging with me, not so much the skulls, the broken pieces of pottery, the theological conversations about resurrection of the body, not the wonder of unearthing treasures from the time of Kings David and Solomon.

Every afternoon, midway between lunch and quitting time, a matronly, grey-haired woman came to the site with a pot of tea. It was not iced-tea. She poured and served each of us the most delicious tea—wish I knew the recipe. By the second or third day I looked forward to her arrival, not only for the break from back-breaking labor, but for her delicious tea and small talk.

Tabitha (Dorcas—respectively the Aramaic and Greek words for “gazelle”), a *disciple* of Jesus, was completely occupied with good deeds and almsgiving (acts of charity). She clothed widows, women dependent on the charity of others. Tabitha was the social safety net of her community. She exemplified the right attitude to possessions taught by Jesus.

Betsy Sholl imagines Tabitha stitching long hours in weakening light, shoulders gathered around the needle’s sharp persistence. Tabitha dies, the widows weep. Peter commands Tabitha to arise. When she takes Peter’s hand, “everything the mourners held as fixed and true bursts at the seams. News runs through the city of Joppa. God mended her. Not one stitch shows.”

Who was the old Israeli woman who brought us tea? I don’t know her name, her country of birth, her family history, her life story. All I know is what she did: she showed up every afternoon and made and served delicious tea.

Who was Tabitha? We don’t know her life story. Was she a widow? Did she have children? Was she a member of the Likud party? We don’t know how she came to own a textile business—very unusual for a woman of the first century CE— or how she came to be a disciple of Jesus. All we know is what she did: she clothed the widows and gave money to the poor.

When Jesus is asked who he is, he doesn’t share his [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com) report, his birth story, his parent’s occupations, what schools he attended, his likes and dislikes, his Myers Briggs Type, his Enneagram number, his love of solitude and the outdoors. If you want to know who I am, Jesus says, look at what I do.

To this point in John's telling of the story, Jesus has turned water into wine; made a whip of chords, drove sheep and oxen out of the Temple, overturned the tables of money changers, spilling their wealth on the floor; debated theology with Nicodemus; discoursed with a Samaritan woman on proper worship; healed a Roman official's son, and healed a lame man on the Sabbath; debated theology with religious experts; fed five thousand people; taught his disciples some hard truths; saved a woman from being stoned to death by self-righteous men; discussed the meaning of true ancestry with traditionalists; restored the sight of a man born blind and in the process disassociated sin from disease; and told some parables.

When John the Baptist sends his disciples to ask Jesus who he is he responds, "Tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news proclaimed to them."

All we can really know about *what* we are is what we do, writes Marilynne Robinson. When the curious want to know who Jesus is, he points to what he does. How do you know the true prophet from a wolf in sheep's clothing, Jesus asks? You will know them, not by what they say but from the consequences of what they do.

All this talk about good deeds makes us Protestants nervous. It is true that Paul does address the issue of "righteousness" or "justice" and asserts that it is available to us only through a virtue he calls "faith" or "trust" or even "fidelity."

But this virtue is for Paul explicitly one that largely consists in *works of obedience* to God and love of others, and the only "works" he claims make no contribution to personal sanctity are certain "ritual observances" prescribed by the Law of Moses, such as circumcision and kosher dietary laws.

James, the brother of Jesus, whose epistle Martin Luther despised, drives the point home: faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. You have faith that God is one? You are doing well. Even the demonic beings have that faith, and they tremble. Faith without works yields nothing. A human being is made righteous by works, and not by faith alone. (James 2:17f, Hart's translation)

On the last day, says Rowan Williams, we shall be judged according to our compassion, not our knowledge or any other achievement.