



ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS
CELEBRATING 200 YEARS

“FEAST OF ST. THECLA”

JUDGES 4:16-24
PSALM 119:33-40
LUKE 24:1-11

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY
SEPTEMBER 24, 2020

St. Thecla at first glance seems so removed from our modern world. According to tradition she hears St. Paul preach and is transfixed by him and his message. She renounces marriage and follows Paul with abandon. Thecla is miraculously saved several times from death. About to be burned at the stake, a torrential storm puts out the flames. About to be eaten by lions in the local arena, she is protected by a lioness who licks her feet. Seeking to be baptized, Thecla jumps into a pool of hungry, man-eating seals and baptizes herself, while the seals are struck by lightning. The governor of the region releases her and she travels and teaches. It is believed that she finally did die a martyr's death.

All of this colorful tradition comes down to us in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, a second-century manuscript¹ which didn't make it into the Canon of Scripture but was popular and widely read in the early Church. It was believed that there was a real woman behind these legends. In the Orthodox Church Thecla is revered as equal to an Apostle and revered as the first female martyr, next to Stephen, the first male martyr.²

Thecla is a saint for our times and for all times. She defies male, patriarchal expectations. She defies

¹ Acts of Paul and Thecla, c. 180CE

² Acts 7:54ff

expectations of her class – she was from a noble family. She defies societal expectations around marriage. Thecla does not accept the labels and restrictions others impose upon her. She resists. She persists.

Thecla was influential enough that theologians like Tertullian (c.200 AD) condemned her for encouraging women to exercise ministries they shouldn't be exercising, like baptism, teaching and preaching – he considered these inappropriately priestly-type ministries for women. Tertullian believed that Thecla encouraged other women to get “inappropriate” ideas above their station. He was right.

Another subversive feature of Thecla's story is that St. Paul, Thecla's inspiration and mentor, is portrayed in a less than noble light. At one point, Paul abandons Thecla to certain rape.³ Paul is not there for her when she gets in trouble. In those days, no judgment would have been passed on Paul's behavior. Today we might find plenty to say about disciples who abandon each other in times of trial.

³ In Pisidian Antioch, by a nobleman named Alexander. Paul denies knowing Thecla.

Women have suffered so many humiliations in the church... The condescensions and the closed doors and sometimes the spiteful meanness and pettiness that can still lie beneath the surface of gender-relations in our church. Women are still not equal and the standards remain higher for the same roles. The church and world both have a long way to go. Racism and unequal access to education compound the unequal treatment of women in the church's history.

When I was in seminary some of my women friends seemed just angry, especially in the generation of women ahead of me. They had suffered more discrimination. I remember thinking: leading with anger is not a smart approach. The late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg famously said: responding in anger is counter-productive. Use sexist comments as a moment to teach, she said. Which is a fine principle, assuming someone is listening. It is in fact - as Ginsberg's comment demonstrates - still not safe for women to be "too angry". Minorities, including women, have to ingratiate ourselves more than that. (I have always wondered why women - over 50% of the world's population - are classed as a "minority".)

In fact, it is OK to be angry. It is ok to be angry if you are black, trans, LGBT or any other dispossessed minority trying to get by on crumbs from the tables of privilege. But if and when we do get our heads above water, here is the important thing we must remember: we must turn around and see who's behind us, and pull them up to stand beside us. As a mentor of mine said: "Treat others *better* than you were treated. That's how things get better".

What is it we need from Thecla? We venerate those we most need to revere. Thecla was such a popular saint because she helped women in particular feel empowered. However, making Thecla simply a proto-feminist doesn't go deep enough into our faith, I think. It doesn't do Thecla justice.

What Thecla demonstrates is the freedom in Christ that is our birthright as Christians. In Galatians Paul writes famously that *there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*⁴ Paul goes on to give a profound discourse on Christian freedom. *For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*⁵ Paul means

⁴ Galatians 3:28

⁵ Galatians 5:1

bondage to old legalisms and categories. Thecla inhabits fully the freedom of Christ and it remakes her from the inside out. Paul goes on to explain that there is a right and a wrong use of our freedom in Christ. *You were called to freedom brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.*⁶ There is a teenage anything-goes-and-I'll-do-what-I-want rebellious “freedom”. Then there is a mature, discerned freedom in Christ, a particular calling to serve the world which every one of us has. Each of us has a tailor-made calling – it is who we are created to be. Thecla is an example of rightly-used freedom in Christ.

Thecla reveals the freedom and power of living entirely in and for Christ. That’s what people needed her for in the 2nd century and that is what we need her for now.

AMEN

⁶ Galatians 5:13

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