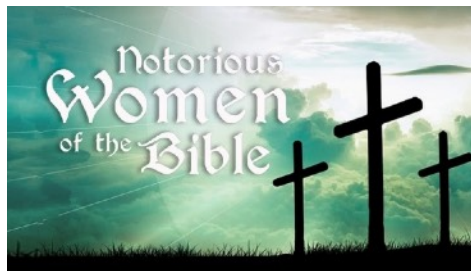


Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
May 16, 2021
Seventh Sunday after Easter

"Thecla: Brave Believer"

Last of six in a series entitled "Happy Easter (Thanks to Women)!"

Act of the Apostles 14:1-7



So much comes to us from this morning's message. It is our final overture in this sermon series entitled "Happy Easter: Thanks to Women". It is the culmination. It is the *dénouement*. My expectations are high for Thecla. What can she bring us? What can she teach us? Let me assure you, she does not disappoint.



First of all, Thecla teaches us against the grain of our own theological tradition. Reformed Protestantism emphasizes, to our disadvantage, the faith

tenet *sola scriptura* (only scripture). *Sola scriptura* ascribes to the belief that *all* that is sufficient for faith is found within the Bible and virtually nothing outside the Bible has any substantive spiritual validity or authority. So many faith perspectives, from Catholics' validation of church 'tradition' and the veneration of saints to Matt Deen's understanding of Creaturely Theology, teach us that while the canon may be closed, it is not the *sole* font of spiritual insight or Christian faith.

Thecla teaches us to be open to sources of spiritual wisdom outside the Bible. I say this because Thecla is not named in the Bible. Nonetheless, she is 'in' the Bible. If we look closely, between verses five and six of chapter fourteen in the Acts of the Apostles, her story resides. ⁵ "There was a plot afoot among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. ⁶ But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country". Yes, we need to, in a real sense, 'read between the lines' to hear her story.



To learn from Thecla, we need to resort to literature outside the canon, iconography, and archeological sites. We read about Thecla from extracanonical sources, specifically a book entitled *The Acts of Paul*. *The Acts of Paul* circulated during the early Christian church, yet a portion of it entitled *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* circulated independently. The book and the story it told of Thecla were most popular from the fourth to the sixth centuries. Iconography imagining Thecla was frequently seen until the twelfth century.¹



¹ Dennis MacDonald, "Thecla, Acts of", found in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume 6, ed. in chief, David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 444.

In Seleucia, Isauria, the traditional location of Thecla's long ministry, there once existed shrines and a huge richly decorated basilica in her honor, almost the length of a football field. Saint Thecla was venerated throughout many provinces in Asia Minor. For an entire basilica to be named after her, much had to have occurred between verses five and six.



The story of Thecla begins when Paul preached in the city of Iconium. The virgin Thecla listened. Paul and his teachings captivated her. Being convinced of her calling to follow and preach the gospel, she abandoned her fiancé, thus infuriating him and her mother. To thwart Thecla, her fiancé and mother had both Jews and Gentiles grow suspicious and antagonistic toward Paul. He was abused and put in jail. This is the contestation referred to in this morning's scripture read by Judy. While incarcerated, Thecla visited Paul. The authorities eventually released Paul and he fled. Thecla declared her desire to follow Paul after which her own mother orchestrated plans for her to be burned to death. On the pyre, a

rain shower extinguished the flames. Thecla then departed Iconium in search of Paul.



Paul and Thecla traveled to Antioch of Pisidia where an official tried to rape her. She resisted. In retaliation, she was sent to the lion's den to be devoured. Instead, the lion just affectionately licked her. Next a bear was sent to devour her.



The lion defending Thecla and the bear fought a titanic battle, after which both the bear and the lion died of their wounds. Next, Thecla baptized *herself* in a pool of killer seals before an electric bolt killed them. Next, the by now very frustrated

authorities tied Thecla between two bulls, with the expectation that she would be pulled apart when red-hot pokers burned the bulls' testicles. Hot fire burned the rope allowing for her escape. Thereafter, Thecla cared for the poor and healed the sick using funds from a wealthy and powerful female patron.



Now, many of you might be wondering, 'Now, really, did all of that really happen? I mean, seriously, man-eating seals?!' If your asking this question, you might also be asking the question 'Did Adam and Eve really exist?' Or, 'did Jonah really get swallowed by a fish'? Or, 'did Jesus really walk on water and turn water into wine?' I suggest to you that these questions of historicity are misplaced. For biblical and extracanonical scriptures did not necessarily intend on conveying to us factual history. Biblical and extracanonical scripture more often than not were written to communicate to us a spiritual or theological Truth, with a capital "T", and not historical truth, with a small 't'.



The historical small 't' truth is that Thecla heard Paul preached and she gave up all - her fiancé, her family, and even her life - for the sake of the gospel. That's really all you need to know. If you are worried about how seals can be electrocuted and if lion actually defended Thecla against a bear, you are missing the theological and spiritual Truths that Thecla's biographer intended to teach us. In short, if you are worried about if something 'really' happened, you are most likely missing the whole point of what was written. When you read the Bible, don't chase the small 't' truths. Crave, search for, mine, and discern the big 'T' Truths.



What is the big “T” truth of Thecla story? Well, there are many possibilities that all hinge on ‘inspiration’. For the most part, Thecla’s biography inspires – it inspires all of us. She was a real Christian lay-woman, archeology confirms it. She met and followed Paul, that is certain. Thecla ministered for approximately fifty years after encountering enormous pressures not to and was ostracized from her family and community. None of that need be doubted historically. All of those biographical realities are inspirational in and of themselves - *without* seals, bulls, bears, and lions. The seals, bulls, bears, and lions are superfluous – they are not the point.



Think about it this way: I know of an extraordinary woman whose precious husband died, who broke her hip, and who is separated from her entire family. Yet she devotes herself to Member Care as if all of Christendom depended on it. No seals needed. I know of a wonderful widow who despite great odds while caring for her parents through death has singlehandedly enabled our church to survive and thrive during COVID by shouldering the technological burden of our virtual

services. No bear needed. I know a woman who works very hard, cares for her husband with chronic back pain, manages a house, serves the Long-Range Planning Team and Member Care, and gives all she can to the work of our church. No lion needed. I know of a woman of incredible strength who though she dislocated her shoulder and tore-off her hamstring, cares for her husband, manages a home, cares for her children and grandchildren, and works tirelessly for our church through Council and, most especially, with Buildings & Grounds. No bulls needed. I know a woman who cares for her mother who had shingles and a broken and dislocated hip, who manages a home, cares lovingly for her husband, and who continues to be a leader of a church after decades of selfless service. No sudden rain shower to extinguish flames on a pyre needed.



I know of a woman who practices weekly, organized virtual anthems, drives through snowstorms or stays overnight at her expense the night before a snowy Sunday morning to play, and who returns her raise back to the church because she knows how much it struggles financially. No lightning bolts needed. I know of

woman who thinks out of the box and whose Spirit is the leaven for our future church growth. No hyperbole is needed to describe her greatness. I know of a woman in her 80s, who has served as our Vice-Chair of Council, who dedicates herself to Loaves & Fishes and Mission & Service. I know of a woman whose talents beautify our Main Street frontage with flowers, ensures our sanctuary and chapel are sacred, and who livens and decorates our bulletin boards so that our church inspires.



The truth about Thecla is that she was one of the first that provided the backbone and thrust to the early Christian church. May we as Protestants keep alive the memory of strong women as the Catholics have rightly done by celebrating Saint Thecla.

As we approach Pentecost and celebrate the induction of new members next week, may we honor the manner in which Thecla and inspirational women

today and through the centuries have propelled the Spirit of God in and through the church to all our benefit. Thecla: 'Brave Believer'. Respect her.

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the people of God responded, "Amen!"