



# Clapping in Church

By Rebecca W. Dolch

**Y**ears ago when I taught drama class at Vacation Bible School, we acted out the story of Tabitha from Acts 9. The title character was played by a very shy little girl whom I had never met. She was from the neighborhood. Although I don't remember her name, I'll never forget her dramatic death reenactment in the fellowship hall of Bloomfield United Methodist Church. It was awe-inspiring. Wild-eyed, grasping her neck, she twirled around the room, slumped onto the floor in a heap, and seemed completely dead except for random giggling.

The role of "poor grieving widows" was played by all of the rest of the girls in the class. They were given full permission to grieve as dramatically as they could. Once we explained what grief could look like, they all rose to the occasion. One of the big mistakes in American culture is thinking that we should experience grief quickly and quietly. If we are caught weeping and wailing and moaning, we are accused of "not handling it very well." So in this particular context it was refreshing to experience a room full of elementary-age girls waxing hysterical. My hope was that twenty or forty years later, when true sorrow hit, they would remember the ragged force of grief and have a clue about how to deal with it.

The Apostle Peter was played by eight-year-old Jason, who also drew the pictures for the VBS newspaper which we put together on the last day of Bible School. Jason was a boy who could grasp the essence of a spiritual story. He took his role of Peter very seriously. The story goes that Peter was in the neighboring village when Tabitha died. Staying true to the plot, Jason hid in the men's bathroom off the fellowship hall during the death scene.

All of the boys in the class had the job of running to the men's room to entreat him, as the scripture said, to "Come with them without delay." As I recall, even though Jason volunteered for the role, the boys had to drag him out of the bathroom. After all, the girls got to grieve uncontrollably; the boys needed some action/adventure to balance the energy.

Finally Jason (AKA the Apostle Peter) got to Tabitha, and as the scripture said, he asked everybody to leave, and he knelt and prayed.

I know that his parents were praying folk. His dad was a Vietnam combat veteran and he really believed that his life was spared

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so that he could serve God and serve people. Every meal, and every night when they put their children to bed, they said prayers. Jason had heard powerful prayers. At home, in Sunday school, sitting through church drawing on the back of the bulletin, he was surrounded by the prayers of the faithful.

That afternoon in front of all of the children, Jason, a natural performer, not a bit shy, gave a powerful prayer. I don't remember the words. I remember being stunned by his prayer, his posture, the conviction in his eight-year-old voice, the faith in what he was saying. Taking on the role and the power of Peter, he knelt down, prayed, and said: "Tabitha, get up."

She jumped right up, and everybody in the fellowship hall, including the other teachers and the people who were there serving the snack, started cheering and clapping wildly.

You never know for sure when people are going to clap. That was a big issue in our church for a while. Some people clapped for the choir. The classical music choir felt left out if the congregation clapped for the contemporary choir and not them. Their director was annoyed if clapping destroyed the contemplative mood he tried to create with music. Everybody was okay about clapping for the children's choir, but nobody clapped for the prayer—not even the woman with Alzheimer's who had been a nightclub singer in her younger days and clapped for almost everything, even the sermon. She was so loud and enthusiastic that she got everybody else going.

Maybe the Vacation Bible School participants weren't really clapping for the prayer. Maybe they were clapping because they had participated in the whole story—the death, the grief, the community response to Tabitha's death, the prayer, and the surprise of seeing someone get up when they thought she was permanently down.

I clap when tradition dictates and also when I am deeply, senselessly moved. Children clap when their souls are so full of joy that it comes out of their hands and feet and bright eyes.

Sometimes a holy story opens the door for so much spiritual energy that we can't sit still. Sometimes a prayer is so powerful that we are over-activated. Sometimes children catch on to the presence of Jesus so quickly that their enthusiasm wakes us up. "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven," Jesus said in Matthew 18. I used to think that meant being pure and sweet and malleable. I've since expanded my thinking to include unbridled zeal, waxing hysterical when the occasion calls for it, adventurous energy, wild clapping, and joy that cannot be contained. □



**Rebecca W. Dolch is an Elder in the Upper New York Annual Conference.**