

“Dorcas”
Acts 9:36-43
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A couple of years ago, I came across the following obituary printed in *The New York Times*:

Matthew Ianniello, the low-key reputed Genovese crime boss known as “Matty the Horse,” who was convicted of rigging construction bids, skimming union dues and wringing protection money from bar owners, pornography peddlers and topless dancers during a half-century career that, among other highlights, helped transform Times Square into the dingy world capital of peep shows in the 1960s and ‘70s, died on Aug. 15 at his home in Old Westbury, on Long Island. He was 92.

Ouch! How would you like to be remembered for being nothing more than a low-life career criminal who left the world worse off for having been born into it. That has got to be one of the most disparaging epitaphs ever published in *The Times*.

On the OTHER hand, not long afterwards, I came across THIS obituary in the very same newspaper:

Eugene Lang, Investor Who Made College Dreams a Reality, Dies at 98: Eugene M. Land, an investor whose spur-of-the-moment promise to an East Harlem sixth-grade graduating class that he would pay for their college education inspired a foundation, led to the support of more than 16,000 children nationwide and made him something of an American folk hero, died on Saturday at his home in Manhattan. He was 98...Mr. Lang, a self-made businessman who flew coach class and traveled on subways and buses, contributed more than \$150 million to charities and institutions during his lifetime...But he will be best remembered for his impulsive gesture in June 1981, when he was invited to deliver the commencement address to 61 sixth graders at Public School 121 on East 103rd St. “I looked out at that audience of almost entirely black and Hispanic students, wondering what to say to them,” he recalled. He had intended to tell them, their families and their teachers that he had attended P.S. 121 more than a half-century earlier that he had worked hard and made a lot of money and that if they worked hard, maybe they could be successful, too. But, he said, “it dawned on me that the commencement banalities I planned were completely irrelevant.” “So I began by telling them that one of my most memorable experiences was Martin Luther King’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech, and that everyone should have a dream,” he said. “Then I decided to tell them I’d give a scholarship to every member of the class admitted to a four-year college.”...He ‘adopted’ the class, treating them to trips and restaurant meals, counseling them through crisis after crisis, and intervening with school officials. Soon, Mr. Lang founded the I Have a Dream Foundation, setting up its office in Manhattan. He hired a project coordinator, established a year-round program of academic support with a mentor and tutoring for each student, and sponsored cultural and recreation outing.”

Over the years, that foundation has grown to where it has now assisted more than 18,000

children nationwide. That's a legacy EVERYONE of us would be envious of, WOULDN'T it!

This morning, we're going to look at ANOTHER epitaph, one every bit as astonishing and inspirational as Eugene Lang's. The figure in our story is the only woman in all of scripture ever to be called a "disciple" and for the early church, she became a model of how the Christian life was meant to be lived. In our scripture lesson, we are informed that there resided in the city of Joppa a woman named Tabitha whose name in Greek was Dorcas meaning "deer" or "gazelle." Joppa, which today is called Jaffa, remains a seaside city some thirty-five miles west of Jerusalem. When we meet her, it is not during her LIFETIME but upon her DEATH, at her FUNERAL. We're not given much information about her such as whether she had ever been married or had children- only that she was "full of good works and acts of charity." Dorcas had spent her entire life doing good and helping the poor, and so after she died, the outpouring of grief over her death was enormous. Can there be any greater epitaph over a person's life than THAT- to be greatly loved and remembered for having spent one's life performing many good works and acts of charity; to be mourned for having spent his or her life in selfless Christian service?

When I was a freshman in college, I lived next door to a senior named Jay. Now Jay was as obnoxious and arrogant as anyone you would ever meet and none of us, not even his ROOMMATE, particularly liked him very much. In fact, behind his back, we would frequently make snide comments about the guy. After graduation, he wanted to become a banker, just like his father. One day, he was sitting in my room when he made a frank confession to me which really caught me off guard. He said, "Dave, I've never said this to anyone before but do you want to know what my greatest desire in life is? It is that when I die, someone I had never met during my lifetime would come to my funeral and shed a tear over me. In other words, I want my life on earth to count for something and to touch people in some profound way." Well I just about broke out in laughter when he told me that. After all, who would possibly shed a tear over HIM when HE died, I thought.

It wasn't until several years later, after I had become a Christian, that the memory of that exchange came to mind. And what he was expressing was that deep down in his heart, there was at work a greater impulse than just acquiring money and much worldly success and achievement. Something said to him that if we can't feel like we've left this world a better place simply by our presence in it, then we would have been a failure, that everything else we may have accomplished, REGARDLESS of how successful it may appear, had actually been of little consequence. Jesus couldn't have expressed it any better than when he said to his followers, "What does it profit someone to inherit the entire world and yet lose his soul in the bargain?"

Continuing with our lesson, after a period of sickness, Dorcas died. Her body was prepared and laid in an upstairs room. Then, two men were sent to get Peter, who was in nearby Lydda where he had just healed a man after eight years of paralysis, in the hope he might be able to perform a SIMILAR miracle on her. Seeing their deep love for the dead woman, he consents to come to the house where Dorcas lay. Upon his arrival, he was greeted by a group of crying widows who spoke of her great love and Christian

service, even displaying some of the shirts and coats she had made for them while she was alive. Apparently, she'd been a seamstress and she thought nothing of expending her own time and energy and resources to see that the widows of Joppa—widows being among the poorest on the economic strata--were properly cared for. Peter then sent everyone out of the room while he prayed for her. Addressing the body, he said, "Tabitha, cumi" meaning "Tabitha, rise!" With those words, Dorcas miraculously opened her eyes and sat up. Calling all the widows back into the room, he presented her to them alive once again. Subsequently, as news of this great miracle spread, many came to believe in the Lord.

Nearly every woman in the Bible is involved in service for service is the manner in which the church expresses its faith and love. When I think back over the years, I can honestly say that without the Dorcases of the church (and these can be male as well as female) to visit the shut-ins and to help with a church's food pantry and to prepare the funeral luncheons, the church would not NEARLY be so effective. Like the Deacons, they are the hands and feet of Jesus Christ in the community and the world, and he is never made MORE MANIFEST than through such service, REGARDLESS of how lowly or insignificant their work might sometime seem.

Years ago, when I lived in California, I got to know one of the saintliest women I have ever met. Her name was Nina Dosker. When she passed away, she was nearly a hundred years old. She had grown up in the West where her parents had settled after arriving in a covered wagon in the early 1880's. She was a member of the same Presbyterian church I attended and I would often visit her, just to hear her stories of rural life at the turn of the twentieth century. She was such a humble woman, and it was no more apparent than when during one of my visits, she said to me, "David, as you know, my eyesight is no longer what it used to be. But I would love to do something for you because you've been such a good friend. If you have any socks with holes in them, I would love to sew them for you. It's not much, but I would love to do that for you." I was so overwhelmed by her offer to sew the holes in my socks (of which I had many) that I almost started to tear up. Of course I told her that I didn't have any holes in my socks, but if I did, I would certainly drop them off to her. To this day, I continue to think of that humble gesture and the saintly spirit in which it was made, and I know that God honored her heart and service as much as God honored any of Peter's or James' or John's or even St. Paul's. No service is EVER too small or insignificant to honor God by, keeping in mind that whatsoever we do to the least of all persons we no less do unto HIM!

Some years ago, I attended a pastor's conference in California and the speaker was Frederick Dale Bruner- a former missionary in the Philippines who subsequently became the Professor of New Testament at Whitworth College in Seattle, Washington. As he took us through a study of John's gospel, he continually referred to the influence of a special woman on his life who, more than any other, was responsible for shaping the eventual course of his life. No, it was not his mother- her name was Henrietta Mears.

The youngest of seven children, Henrietta Mears was born in Fargo, North Dakota in 1890. From her earliest years, she knew she was going to be a teacher, understanding that to be able to make a difference in the lives of young people was the most important calling anyone could ever have. As she liked to say, "God doesn't call us to sit on the

sidelines and watch. He calls us to be on the field, playing the games.” As a single woman, she went on to teach high school chemistry in Minnesota, even directing the drama productions there. As involved as she was in the life of her students, she was EQUALLY involved in the lives of her Sunday School students on weekends. Knowing Christ intimately and telling others about him was her first and foremost objective. During a trip to southern California in the late 1920’s, she came under the influence of Dr. Stewart P. MacLennan, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood. Much to her surprise, she was offered the job of Director of Christian Education there in 1928.

Taking over a Sunday School program which already had 400 students in it, within two years, there were over 4,000 involved in it. YES, I said her Sunday School program had grown from four hundred to over FOUR THOUSAND in just two years time! During her tenure, over 400 young people entered full-time Christian service, one of whom was Dr. Bruner. Miss Mears, who became known for her boundless energy, infectious laughter, and colorful hats, began to write church lessons that would be bold, challenging, and captivating, always centered on Christ and faithful to God’s Word. It was SO successful that in time, it became the standard for the entire denomination.

When the demand became TOO great, she and a group of businessmen established Gospel Light Publications, one of the first publishers in the Christian education field. She was also inspired to found a retreat center for her high school and college-aged students. “If you place people in an atmosphere they feel close to God and then challenge them with His Word,” she said, “they will make decisions.” And they did! Though she never married, she remained head of the Christian Ed program there at Hollywood Pres for the next thirty-five years, until her death in 1963. She was a modern-day Dorcas who through her commitment and love, touched thousands of lives that would eventually go on to change the world in the furtherance of Christ’s kingdom. That included such well-known figures as Bob Munger and Earl Palmer who for many years served as pastors of First Pres in Berkeley, Ca.; Donn Moomaw, who eventually went on to become pastor of Hollywood Pres himself; Darrell Guder, Professor of World Missions at Princeton Theological Seminary; Jim Edwards, Professor of New Testament at Whitworth College; and Dick Halverson, former chaplain of the U.S. Senate.

Henrietta Mears, this simple woman went on to change the world through her years of loving, dedicated service and it is CONTINUING to touch lives. Several years ago, I attended a pastors’ retreat hosted by our presbytery where I spent a good deal of time talking to the pastor of a neighboring church. When I mentioned Henrietta Mears to him, his eyes lit up. He told me that the greatest influence of HIS life was his own pastor while growing up who eventually became a professor at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, Ca. His life TOO had been transformed while a student in Henrietta Mears’ Sunday School classes.

My friends, the question before EACH of us this morning is what is YOUR epitaph going to look like? Which lives are YOU currently influencing which in turn will touch OTHERS in the years to come? I am convinced that if we had to write our OWN obituaries, we would all highlight whatever accomplishments we had done, itemizing every noble act and good deed we had ever performed throughout our lifetimes. We’d want to list every educational degree we ever earned, all the important and prestigious

positions we occupied, the prominent clubs we were once members of, and the service organizations we had generously supported. We'd want to leave a lasting impression on people of just how good we were and the degree of success we achieved over our lifetime. However, if GOD were to write our obituary for us, I suspect it would look ENTIRELY DIFFERENT. There would be no mention of the colleges and graduate schools we attended, the awards we'd received, or how many rungs we ascended up the corporate ladder- only whether or not we did good and helped the poor; whether we aided the orphans and widows in their affliction; whether we had demonstrated compassion for those much weaker and far less fortunate than ourselves because but for the grace of God, those other persons could just as easily be US.

This story confirms for us that the greatest legacy we can ever leave is the legacy of love demonstrated through humble service. However, in our continual striving for wealth and status and success, we seem to succeed at everything else BUT in building a legacy of deep and lasting relationships founded upon mutual love and service. Friends, the opposite of death is NOT life, but rather it is the capacity to LOVE and BE LOVED. For when we are able to give and receive love from one another, then we can not only grow into the kind of person God would have us to become but we leave an influence that will endure long after we have passed on. Like Dorcas, like Nina Dosker, like Henrietta Mears, and as so many of YOU continue to demonstrate on a daily basis, we CAN leave a lasting influence by serving as a channel or conduit of Christ's love WHEREVER we are and in WHATEVER capacity he might put us- through such love and service as you or I may humbly offer. Let us pray...

Gracious God, we have already been told what is good and what it is that the Lord requires of us, that we are to do right, love goodness, and walk humbly with you. Help us to remain committed to that ideal and to make it the one aspiration that guides our every thought and every activity of every new day. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.