

"Lesser Known People of the New Testament"
"Dorcas"

Dan Hurley is an interesting fellow. He stands out with his yellow hat, yellow sport coat, yellow bow tie and saddle shoes. But what he *does* also sets him apart. He's become known as "The 60-Second Novelist".

It all started in 1983 on the streets of Chicago, where he tried to get the attention of anyone walking by through offering to write their life story – *in a minute*. He enjoyed it so much he took a week off from his job as an editor for the American Bar Association and spent it on sidewalks writing. Soon he was earning enough money to live on. He moved his act to New York, and began to travel all over the country, and all over the world, doing his stint at all kinds of special event occasions.

He talks to each person, asking simple, direct questions. Then he uses those facts to write an imaginative, warm, and sometimes funny story of their life. He types it out on his 1938 Remington typewriter. Then he reads it aloud to the person, signs it with a fountain pen, and gives it to them in a form suitable for framing. He's written a life story for over 50,000 people, including a number of celebrities.

Currently Mr. Hurley is a health and medical journalist who has written 4 books and published numerous magazine articles. After taking some time off from his 60 Second Novel interviews, he's back on the street again doing the thing for which he's best known.

If someone were to write your life story in 60 seconds, what would it say? 60 seconds isn't long, but good stories don't have to be long! Take Dorcas, for example. Luke, in writing the Book of Acts, summarizes the life of a lady named Dorcas probably in less than 60 seconds (she's only mentioned in the Bible in one brief account). Her story is found in Acts, chapter 9. "Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas" (Acts 9:36a). Tabitha is the Aramaic rendering. Dorcas is the Greek version of this woman's name. It means "Gazelle!" She lived in Joppa, and is a disciple of Jesus. Luke goes on: "She was devoted to good works and acts of charity" (Acts 9:36b). The New International Version reads: "(She) was always doing good and helping the poor."

Dorcas got sick, and died. For some reason, they want Simon Peter to come. He was only 9 miles away in a place called Lydda. Two men were sent to him with the message, "Hurry and come!" And he does. When he arrived, the two men took him to an upstairs room where the body lay. "All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them" (Acts 9:39). It's a touching scene. Widows whom she had probably helped lovingly showed Peter some of the garments Dorcas had sewed. "Look, Peter (sob)...look at what Dorcas made – aren't they beautiful."

Peter told them to leave the room. Then he knelt down beside the body, and prayed. After that, he looked at the body and said, "Tabitha, get up!" She begins to breath, and her eyes opened! He extends his hand to her and helps her get up! "Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive" (Acts 9:41).

I'm sure Luke wants to draw attention to the miracle that's taken place! The power of Jesus is so dominant in the early Church that even dead people are raised back to life! (Isn't it interesting? Peter didn't go to Joppa to conduct a funeral. He went there to conduct a resurrection)! If only that kind of power were in the church today! *Well, it is, in some places!* Let's not underestimate what amazing things can happen when we pray and seek the presence and power of Jesus and His Spirit in our churches today!

Maybe Luke is also using this story of Dorcas to trace the expansion of the gospel from just a *Jewish audience* into a *Gentile world* – for there were many non-Jews in Joppa. For he writes, "This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord" (Acts 9:42).

But what I'd like us to look at today is simply the brief summary of Dorcas' life. I doubt that Dan Hurley, the 60 Second Novelist, could have written a more beautiful life story of Dorcas than Luke did! She was always doing good and helping the poor and needy. She used her very practical talent of sewing as an expression of her faith and love. She touched people's lives for Christ! Here we are today, still remembering her labor of love! I've known of Sunday School classes named the "Dorcas Class", and ladies groups called the "Dorcas Society", given to practical ministries of good works.

I'm preaching this message today to highlight and celebrate ordinary people and the value of their simple gifts and ministries. We can so easily fall into the trap of assuming that people with exceptional skills and gifts – people who are prominent and in the public eye – are more important than those with lesser gifts or abilities.

This happens in the church. The false assumption that those who preach sermons...teach a Sunday School class...chair a committee...lead a small group...play or sing beautiful music – these people are so much more important to God and the church than the average church-goer. But not everyone's wired to be up front and in the spotlight, to serve the Lord in that way.

It's true, the church needs leaders! If a church is to be strong and vital it needs to identify, enlist, train and equip people to be leaders in the church. And it's a beautiful thing when people discover leadership abilities they didn't realize they had! But having said this, not everybody is gifted with leadership skills that put them at the head of a committee or in an up-front role in the church. *Practical skills, and behind the scenes work, is just as important to the kingdom of God!*

Scripture bears this out. For instance, we read this in Romans 12:4-8: "For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully."

We have different functions in the church. And we have different gifts of the Holy Spirit. Some are mentioned here. Notice, there are prominent gifts like teaching and leadership. But also

listed are practical service, encouragement, showing mercy, giving. Most of these don't put people in the spotlight, but how important and valuable they are in helping the church function.

Apparently Dorcas must have had the spiritual gift of showing mercy, or maybe service, because it says she was *devoted* to doing good and helping the poor. She made clothing and gave it to widows – how beautiful a thing is that!

Every church has its behind the scenes people who do the practical things to keep the church going. Changing the altar cloths. Lighting the candles. Decorating the church for the seasons. Counting the offering. Printing the church bulletin. Being in the kitchen when meals are served. Preparing the communion elements. Cleaning the church. These tasks are just as important as what we do up front in worship or leading a church meeting.

The key is, Dorcas was "devoted" to these good works she did! What a gift to the church when people do these common, practical tasks with *devotion and commitment*. I'm thinking of a man in a church I served. He was the head usher for many years. It was a passion, it was his thing! When he became ill and was no longer able to do it, it was agonizing for him. *Practical ministries of love and service are so important in the church!*

But this is true of life in general, of life outside the church, too. We all hear about the people who grab the headlines: the superstar athlete or Hollywood actor/actress, the powerful politician, the TV personality, the Grammy award winning musical artist, etc. Oh, they've got so much talent, so much influence, so much wealth and fame. *They keep the world running!*

I'll tell you who else keeps the world running. It's the vendors who sell you your hot dog or pretzel or drink at the ball game. The sound or lighting technicians who enable the stars to do their concerts. The nurses and nurses aids and administrative personnel who staff the local life care facility's nursing unit. The garbage men (and women) who pick up our trash. The cooks and servers at our favorite restaurants. The truck drivers who deliver so much of what we need. The men and women who work at McDonalds or Turkey Hill or Sheetz, earning salaries that will never make them rich. The carpenters, electricians, lawn care people, exterminators, customer service reps, teachers, salesmen and women, and so on, and so on - all the people who provide goods and services so that life goes on. People often unnoticed. Often taken for granted. Often underappreciated. The Dorcas of the world.

There's something that's been making the rounds on the internet for some time now. It's called the Charles Shulz philosophy. (Charles Shulz was the creator of the Peanuts cartoon character). Snopes tells us that Charles Shulz really didn't write it, that it somehow was attributed to him. Even so, I think there's a lot of wisdom in it, and it fits in with what we're thinking about in this message. It says:

1. Name the five wealthiest people in the world.
2. Name the last five Heisman trophy winners.
3. Name the last five winners of the Miss America pageant.

4. Name ten people who have won the Nobel or Pulitzer Prize.
5. Name the last half dozen Academy Award winners for best actor and actress.
6. Name the last decade's worth of World Series winners.

How did you do? The point is, few of us remember the headliners of yesterday. These are no second-rate achievers. They are the best in their fields. But the applause dies. Awards tarnish. Achievements are forgotten. Accolades and certificates are buried with their owners.

Here's another set of questions. See how you do with these:

1. List a few teachers who aided your journey through school.
2. Name three friends who have helped you through a difficult time.
3. Name five people who have taught you something worthwhile.
4. Think of a few people who have made you feel appreciated and special.
5. Think of five people you enjoy spending time with.

The lesson: The people who make a difference in your life are not the ones with the most credentials...the most money...or the most awards. They simply are the ones who care the most.

Dorcas cared the most! She used her simple talents and gifts to bless others. Her life story doesn't take up much space in the Bible. But the Book of Acts treats us to a 60 second biography summarizing her magnificent life! She was *devoted to* doing good and helping the poor. She made hand-sewn articles of clothing to give away to others!

How would your life and my life be summed up in 60 seconds? I hope mine would say that I cared about others. And beyond that, that I did my best to love the Lord and use the gifts given to me to bless others for Jesus.

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
Community United Methodist Church
August 8, 2021*

