

“Partners in faith: Dorcas”

Acts 9:36-41

Wayne Eberly

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A few years ago, I was preparing a sermon on Dorcas, this woman who is noted in Acts chapter nine for the following characteristics. “She was always doing good and helping the poor.” Dorcas dies in the passage we are reading today. Her death left a gaping hole in the life of the early church. We are told her dead body was surrounded by a whole host of widows who were crying and showing the robes and other clothing Dorcas had made. As I was working on my sermon back then, I happened to glance through the obituaries that are listed every day in the Westerly Sun. One of the names listed in the obituaries that particular day caught my attention. The woman who died was named Dorcas. It could be that women named Dorcas die every day and their names fill the pages of obituaries in local papers all throughout our nation. On the other hand, Dorcas might be a pretty rare name. I have lived in California, Texas, and Rhode Island, and in my sixty years walking this planet earth I have never met a woman named Dorcas. Not on the west coast, the gulf coast, or the east coast. Maybe I am grasping at straws, but I felt like finding an obituary about Dorcas was a little sign from God.

Knowing that the Dorcas from the bible was always doing good and helping the poor, it was nice to hear that this modern-day Dorcas who died was survived by her beloved husband, that she was a devoted mother, a cherished grandmother, and even a loving great grandmother. You do not build that kind of strong and loving family without being a person who does good and helps others. Even her wishes for donations speak to a woman who understood the importance of helping others. She asked that donations in her memory be made to the music ministry of her church. But if you happened to be here on the Sunday I preached about Dorcas in November of 2018, you might remember her most noted contribution to the cause of humanity was inventing the American Green-Bean Casserole. Yes, that green bean casserole. With a recipe that calls for just six ingredients, American households have mixed together

a can of cream of mushroom soup, a can of cooked green beans, a bit of milk, soy sauce, pepper, popped it in the oven, tossed some crunchy friend onions on top, and out comes a staple of American Thanksgiving dinners. Thanks to Dorcas.

It was at this point in preparing my sermon for today, once again a sermon about the Dorcas from the pages of the Book of Acts, that my sermon got sidetracked. I started to think, “If someone took the time to write an obituary about Dorcas Reilly, the inventor of the green bean casserole, why don’t I take a stab at writing an obituary for the Dorcas who was always doing good and helping the poor. Knowing that her death brought out great weeping from the widows of the church, deep sadness at her passing, that her life was marked by doing good and helping the poor, that she had a whole showroom of robes and clothing she had made for others, knowing that the Dorcas from Acts seems to be the epitome of a devout and faithful woman of God, I wrote the following obituary from the little that we know about this disciple from Joppa, a woman named Tabitha and known to all by the name Dorcas.

Today there is no joy in Joppa. The community of faith lost a precious friend when Tabitha, also known as Dorcas, passed away. The death of Dorcas has torn apart the fabric of our close-knit church family. Dorcas spent her days sewing and knitting, making robes and clothing that gave an outer covering for many while bringing an inner sense of warmth and gratitude because of her selfless giving. People would comment about our dear Dorcas with a phrase that was said over and over again. “She was always doing good and helping the poor.” Her death even brought a visit from that prominent disciple Cephas, who like Tabitha, was also known by another name. Peter himself came and paid his respects, coming alongside the heartbroken group who gathered to mourn the death of Dorcas.

I feel pretty good about the obituary I wrote for Dorcas. I think it captures the essence of who she was and the loss the community felt with her passing. Plus, the visit from Peter must have been a sign that this was a woman whose life made a lasting impact on the early

believers. If the Dorcas of green bean casserole fame warranted an obituary, doesn't the Dorcas who was always doing good and helping the poor deserve her own words of warm remembrance? And then it occurred to me. There is one obvious reason why there is no obituary for that woman from Joppa named Dorcas, the one who was always doing good and helping the poor. By end of this short story, Dorcas is no longer dead! Of course there is no obituary. You do not write obituaries for people who are not dead. And if you do, people like Dorcas interrupt the grieving and mourning to say, "Rumors of my death are greatly exaggerated." Friends, Dorcas is raised from the dead, and as chapter nine in the Book of Acts draws to a close, Dorcas is alive and well, and without a doubt she continued doing good and helping the poor.

Now this might seem obvious, but you can do a lot of good and help many poor people if you are alive. Unlike Dorcas Reilly, whose mortal life came to an end even though her casserole lives on, there is no record in the bible that Tabitha, known as Dorcas, ever died again. While there is no record of her death, there are numerous signs that Dorcas is alive and well, continuing to do good and to help the poor, carrying on her work of knitting and sewing and loving and caring. How do I know this? I googled it!

- Did you know Dorcas hosts a monthly meeting on the second Tuesday of every month at the Cleveland Church of Christ. Dorcas and her fellowship of believers spend their time at their monthly meeting praying for the needs of others. After they pray, they send cards of encouragement. Dorcas presides over a close-knit community of women. They often gather for a meal and brainstorm how they can meet the needs of people facing challenges. When the Dorcas Fellowship at the Cleveland Church of Christ meets together, they are always doing good and helping the poor.
- Dorcas also manages to keep up an office in Brooklyn, New York. The many volunteers who make up the Dorcas Medical Mission provide medical, surgical, dental, and vision care for the poor and

underserved...globally. Globally. Dorcas is involved in global ministry, doing good and helping the poor.

- I guess if you have been raised from the dead, being in multiple locations at a moment's notice is not that big a deal, but I was surprised to see Dorcas is heading up a ministry at a church in Arlington, Texas. Her experience in making robes and clothing prepared her to launch a quilting ministry, where she and others make quilts for seriously ill children. Dorcas, who once met Peter, also must be acquainted with Charlie Brown. I say that because their project making quilts for seriously ill children is called Project Linus. And when they are not making quilts, they make the costumes for when the church celebrates Black History Month.

As I was googling Dorcas, I came across a ministry she started in Cary, North Carolina, whose mission is to provide compassionate assistance to area residents to empower them to become stable and self-sufficient. Dorcas Ministries in Cary, North Carolina lists the following four things as their values.

COMPASSION: We will show kindness and sensitivity to our neighbors, as an act of faith.

DIGNITY: We will respect the unique worth of each individual.

JUSTICE: We will strive to lift up the least among us.

STEWARDSHIP: We will use sound business practices to manage the resources entrusted to us.

Dorcas Ministries in Cary, North Carolina. Dorcas Ministries was formed in June of 1968. A small group of Christians was brought together to address a common concern: how to best serve the neighbors in their community. Dorcas Ministries in Cary, North Carolina is made up of people from different races and denominations, but they are united in Christ. Since 1968 they have been involved in literacy programs, they have provided transportation and meals, opened a thrift shop, helped the homeless, given scholarships and established other programs that lead people to become self-reliant and successful. If anyone thinks Dorcas has died, you will be surprised to hear that in 2018, as Dorcas and her team of dedicated disciples celebrated their 50th year in ministry in Cary,

North Carolina, their team of 600 volunteers served 24,000 clients. As I said, when it comes to Dorcas, reports of her death have been greatly exaggerated. Dorcas is alive and well. And I don't know what she did in the first 2,000 years that she and the church have been alive, but I can tell you she is hard at work in cities big and small, in ministries reaching thousands and in ministries reaching a handful, but no matter how many and no matter what the need, Dorcas continues doing good and helping the poor.

I'm also pretty sure Dorcas does not need her name to be in the spotlight. How many times has this woman who was always doing good and helping the poor whispered into someone's ear or given them a nudge to carry on this good and meaningful type of ministry? How many ministries that do exactly what Dorcas did are not named after Dorcas. Knowing that Dorcas made robes and other clothing makes me think of a ministry here at our church. In explaining to our church how Sewing Good Souls got its start, Lois Gardner shared the way her connection to sewing moved from resistance as a young child to interest to experience as she grew in her love of sewing, until finally sewing became a passion, a passion that found an outlet through making quilts and dresses for those in need. I think our friend Dorcas is extremely pleased that this little sewing ministry has both come to life and has brought so much life to others. Like Dorcas, the sewing ministry is doing good and helping others, with dresses that have traveled to the Chickumbuso Widows and Orphan project in Africa; quilts that have gone as far as Navaho Indians, refugees from Afghanistan, and the Baltimore Backpack Outreach Project where teens, identified by the FBI, have been removed from sex trafficking rings. Thinking of the dual names of the woman in the bible, I guess it would be okay for us to call our ministry here, "Sewing Good Souls, AKA The Dorcas Do-Gooders."

Maybe Dorcas wasn't whispering only in the ear of Lois Gardner when our sewing ministry came to life. Maybe Dorcas whispered in the ear of Florence Madison when the church started the Adult Day Care Center, or in the ear of those who started the Early Learning Center, or when our church and others came together to form the Warm Center and the Jonnycake Center. Any organization, any ministry, that is always

doing good and helping the poor, well, as I said, the reports of the death of Dorcas have been greatly exaggerated.

Rhode Island has a ministry named after Dorcas. Along with all the other things that Dorcas International Institute of Rhode Island does, our Rhode Island Dorcas works to resettle refugees. A refugee is someone who has had to flee their home country because of persecution or war or other distress. Their lives are in upheaval. Their survival is threatened. The Refugee Resettlement program works with those who have gone through a lengthy process of being vetted by our government, a process that verifies the dangers they are escaping, and that finally approves them to be admitted into the refugee resettlement program. When these refugees arrive, what an opportunity for Dorcas to do what Dorcas has always done...to do good and to help the poor. The timing of this sermon is such that next Sunday, we have the chance as a church to hear from Sarah Antaya, who is on staff with Dorcas International, as she helps us discover ways our church might be a Dorcas for someone who is here in our country as a refugee. I feel like Dorcas is whispering in our ear that our church has a role to play in welcoming ones who have come out of terrible situations and are seeking to make a new home.

The story of Dorcas is right at the end of chapter nine in the Book of Acts. As the story of Dorcas comes to an end, something absolutely amazing happens to the church. Peter receives a vision, and in a nutshell, God opens the door for the church to reach out to the world, to the Gentile world, to the entire world, with a message that God's love is for all people. God not only opens the door, God calls his church to reach out to all the world, to all the people of the world. Up to that point the Jewish Christians could well have thought the gospel was just for them. But by the time God is done with Peter and Peter has had a meal with a Gentile named Cornelius, in the house of that Gentile named Cornelius, and the Holy Spirit had filled Cornelius and the other Gentiles, Peter is led to proclaim, "Now I realize that God does not show favoritism but accepts the people of every nation." I wonder if Dorcas might have even been whispering in the ear of Peter, "Take the gospel to all people Peter! Do good and help the poor of every nation, for the people of every nation all belong to God."

When we do good and help the poor, when we do good and help the poor of every nation, of every color, of every language, of every culture, we are affirming that the death of Dorcas has been greatly exaggerated. When we take up the mantle of doing good and helping the poor, the mantle of doing good and helping others, the mantle of doing good and spreading God's love to all people, including all people, welcoming all people, embracing all people, I feel like Dorcas sits up straight in her bed and says, "The rumors of my death are greatly exaggerated."

One of the most beautiful experiences we have ever had involves a woman who like Dorcas was Jewish. And fittingly with the work that Dorcas International does, this story involves a Jewish woman who was helping a refugee. During our time in Houston, Julie was working to help resettle refugees. One day a woman named Pam came and met with Julie. Pam told Julie that she had a deep hurt in her life and was looking for a way to serve others. Julie connected Pam with the Refugee Resettlement Program and Pam became a mother to several of the Sudanese refugees, called the Lost Boys. Although the Lost Boys were Christian, the difference in faith was not a hindrance for Pam, a Jewish woman, as she reached out in love.

Pam became special friends with a young man named James. Unfortunately, James was very sick and spent most of his time in the hospital. Pam visited him frequently. When December rolled around Pam came to Julie and said she wanted to do something special for James. She asked if Julie had any ideas. Julie suggested that Pam bring Christmas to James in the hospital. This seemed like a great idea, except for one small problem. Pam said to Julie, "I'm a Jew. I don't know how to do Christmas!" Julie told Pam how to do Christmas, and sure enough Pam, a Jewish woman, brought Christmas to James, a young Christian man.

When James did not improve, and his death drew near, Pam came to his bedside. The night James died Pam held him in her arms. Although the sadness was deep, Pam shared that an equally deep healing

took place in her life. It turned out that the thing that motivated Pam to help others was that her son had been murdered ten years before. Pam's son died alone, with no one to hold him. Now, in reaching out in service and love, Pam had been given the opportunity to give the gift to someone else that had been denied her son. She held the dying boy as he passed from this life to the next.

Early on in this sermon I told you I set out to write an obituary for Dorcas. I couldn't do it. Dorcas was raised from the dead. And the more I think about it, the more I am convinced that writing an obituary for Dorcas is the wrong thing to do. How can Dorcas be dead, when everywhere I look, I see her face in your face, when I sense her compassion in your compassion, when I see her sewing needles in your sewing needles, when I see her quilts in your quilts, when I witness her love in your love, when the touches of her kindness are repeated again and again in the touches of your kindness. How can Dorcas be dead when people like you, our dear family of faith at Dunn's Corners, spend your lives pursuing such a good and worthy goal, the goal of doing good and helping the poor.

Friends, Christians, Dunn's Cornerians, I come today not to bury Dorcas, but to celebrate the life she continues to live in you, in all of you, in each and every one of you. For whenever people of faith do good and help the poor and show God's love in a multitude of ways, the spirit of that dear woman named Dorcas proves to be alive and well. There can be no doubt. The evidence is everywhere. The rumors that Dorcas is dead are greatly exaggerated. And for that we can all say, "Praise the Lord!"