

HANDMADE BY DORCAS
Acts 9:36-43

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Amarillo, Texas
May 27, 2018

It takes him less than a minute, guaranteed. This crazy looking character who wears a yellow fedora, a yellow silk butterfly bow tie, and a yellow blazer has gained attention from the likes of *USA Today*, *Boston-Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Reader's Digest*, and *CNN.com*. His name is Dan Hurley. He is a sidewalk performer. No, he's not a mime, a juggler, a folk singer, or a saxophone player. Mr. Hurley plays the typewriter keys. Clickety-clack, ziiiiip, ding – the sound he makes on his 1923 Remington typewriter. He's a "performance writer." He's a 60-second novelist.

While he started working the streets, now he works the elite parties – parties for AT&T, Macy's, IBM, CBS, Bloomingdale's, and Seton Hall University. He masters his craft by sitting down and talking to you, interviewing you. "How's life treating you lately?" "Are you in love?" "How'd you meet your wife?" He listens carefully, very carefully. And then, in 60 seconds or less, there you are in black and white – on a white sheet with a carbon copy beneath for him to keep. He writes your story, your whole life – poignant and true on one page – in under a minute. He's already done 22,000 so far.

Dan Hurley remembers his favorite love story.

On August 27, 1986, I was hired to write 60-Second Novels at a party for CBS Magazines, held at Rye Playland, an old amusement park north of New York City. One of the many people who stood in line for me that day was a pretty blue-eyed woman named Alice, who told me about a recently ended relationship and how she was dealing with it, in part by taking a lot of walks along the ocean. In response, I wrote something I almost never do: a prediction for how she would find the man of her dreams.

A Walk Along the Ocean

Alice went out with Jeff for four years and then he broke up with her because he felt it wasn't right and he was confused, which made her very unhappy at the time, but now she thinks it was for the best. In the year and a half or two since then, she has gone on dates but either she likes the guy and he doesn't like her or vice versa.

Well this is all pretty rotten.

So she has taken to seeing her grandmother, a very wise woman, encouraging and loving and understanding. Alice talks with her and feels much better, and finds warmth and laughter. But how will she ever find true love?

One day, after visiting her grandmother, Alice will go for a walk along the ocean, and she shall meet a man. He will ask her a question and the first thing she will think is, “Wow is this guy SOMETHING!” and they will talk and fall in love.

He might come from a ship. He might be swimming. He might be walking. Maybe he will fall from the sky, or maybe he will come from beneath the waves. But the important thing is he will come from the ocean after she goes to see grandma and isn't even thinking about a man.

For there are plenty of fish in the sea, and many men, too.

Later, through a course of coincidental meetings, Dan Hurley went on to marry Alice. Rye Playland is located directly on the ocean's bay. Indeed, she met him the first time sitting not twenty yards from the shore.

The 60-second novelist is no novice. He was contributing editor for *Psychology Today* before he was a sidewalk Shakespeare. His book, *The 60-Second Novelist*, hit #22 on Amazon.com. (Illustration from *Homiletics*, May 2001, p. 11, additional information from www.instantnovelist.com)

How would your story read? What would it look like to have your life summed up in a paragraph or two?

The truth of the matter is, whether we realize it or not, those around us can pretty accurately sum us up in just a sentence or two. Despite all the complexities of human character, the depth of human dimensions, and the multi-facets of mankind, the truth of the matter is that at the end of the day our lives can be summed up by most folk with a clickety-clack, ziiiip, ding – a 60-second summary.

Here in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke summarized – with a clickety-clack, ziiiip, ding – the life of a lady by the name of Tabitha or Dorcas – whichever you prefer to call her. Her life is summarized in 94 written words. We are told what Dorcas did, how she lived, died, then lived again.

Her name means “gazelle.” Luke summarized her with this sentence, “this woman was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity, which she continually did.”

Dorcas was one of those quiet servants, who worked week after week, year in and year out, in her church, hardly even noticed by those around her. Hardly even noticed, that is, until she is gone. She didn't have the ability to teach. Her leadership skills were not outstanding – if she had any at all.

But Dorcas didn't try to do what she couldn't do. She did do what she could do.

Put another way, Dorcas does a lot for people, and she does it all the time. She takes time, all of the time, to serve others. She is loved and admired because of her servant-like spirit. She does what others can't – or at least won't – do.

Dorcas became sick and died. They washed her body in accordance with the Jewish custom of “purification of the dead,” laying her in the upper room. Peter was in Lydda, which was only about ten miles away from Joppa. When the disciples learned that Peter was there, they sent two men – messengers – entreating him, begging him to come to Joppa right now. Don't delay.

When Peter arrived, they brought him to the upper room where he witnessed all the widows of Joppa weeping. As the widows wept, they displayed all of the robes and garments that Dorcas had made for them while she was alive. One widow showed her robe to another and said, “Look, look. Can you believe she spent all the time making this for me? I was down to just two tunics, and then Dorcas made me this one. It is my very favorite of the three.”

Another widow chimed in, “I don't know how I would have made it without Dorcas. After my husband died, I didn't have any way to make a living and buying new clothes was out of the question. Then Dorcas showed up. She showed up with a new robe – this robe, one she'd made just for me.”

They were thankful. They were weeping while they were remembering, remembering Dorcas's deeds.

Peter asked them all to leave, every last one of them. He knelt down and prayed, perhaps like he'd never prayed before. He turned to Dorcas's by now cold corpse, and he declared, “Tabitha, arise.”

Look at the last sentence of verse 40.

And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter, she sat up.

Peter presented her to the widows who had been so dependent upon her. And when the word spread that Dorcas was alive again – alive and well – many others in the city of Joppa “believed in the Lord” (verse 42). Dorcas was an indispensable member of that community.

Dorcas was indispensable. The widows were weeping, displaying what she had done to make their life bearable. And everyone was pondering the same point: What are we going to do without Dorcas? How is anybody going to be able to replace Dorcas?

To be sure, the early church would have survived without this little-known lady who sewed garments for the widows. But don't say for one moment that her death wouldn't have made a difference. Don't say for a moment that the church in Joppa wouldn't have been weaker. And don't you dare say that just anyone could have done what Dorcas did.

Because they couldn't. And everyone knew it. And the widows were weeping because Dorcas is irreplaceable. She is indispensable.

Thank God Peter brings her to life again.

Think about the one person who was present at just the right moment when you needed someone the most – someone whose presence really changed your life. Who could have replaced that person? Probably no one. They probably were absolutely indispensable to you at the moment.

If Dan Hurley were to write your short story with a clickety-clack, ziiiip, ding, what would he write about you?

Luke told us that Dorcas was a one-of-a-kind servant for Christ, a one-of-a-kind servant for Christ's church. When your time comes, when your day dawns and they are washing your body and laying it in the upper room, when they gather around your cold corpse, what will those in the community of Christ say about you? Will they say, like they did about Dorcas, "Look what she did for me." "Did I tell you about the time he...." "You know, I remember the time that he...." "I'll forever be in her debt because she...."

On and on the stories went about Dorcas. What stories will your brothers and sisters in Christ share about you and what you meant to them?

There are some of you who work so hard for Christ's kingdom, so hard for First Baptist Church – for your brothers and sisters in Christ here – that should death seize you away from us, indeed, there would be a valley of void, a mountain of deeds undone. We would wring our hands like the widows and say, "What are we going to do without him?" "Who will ever fill her shoes? She was one-of-a-kind."

You may not know it, but you could be sitting next to Dorcas, even today. The person on the pew right beside you may serve and love others in such a way that she has made a real difference. Even as I prepared the sermon this week, I was reminded of two specific ministries in our church that mirror the work of Dorcas.

The first ministry is called "Hemmed in Prayer." Since 2010, those involved in this ministry have sewn 1,450 garments. Many of those garments find their way to orphanages in Kenya or to the many places First Baptist goes on mission. They sew and they pray; they pray and they sew. And there are orphans who can hold up a piece of clothing and say, "Look what she did for me. I was naked, and you clothed me." As you do it unto the least of these, you have done it unto the Christ. Here is a garment sewn by a Dorcas at First Baptist Church of Amarillo. It will most likely go to a faraway land to help somebody that our Dorcas doesn't even know.

Or there is yet another ministry called "Yarns of Hope." This group knits, crochets, and sews shawls and blankets to help those who have a chronic illness or cancer. Pillows are made for breast cancer survivors. And a unique hand muff to help those suffering from Alzheimers. This is a prayer shawl, crocheted by Yarns of Hope. Someone, somewhere, forgotten by so many, has been remembered by these ladies who not only cover bodies with blankets, but hearts with prayers.

One of the most interesting things about the story is that Dorcas really doesn't stand out as a leader. She's not an apostle. She's not a prophet. She is simply a servant. A servant who made a difference every single day. A servant who showed the love of Christ in small ways.

Showing the love of Christ in small ways carries a big result.

Jamie Winship stood before the Islamic court. The question was posed. "Do you understand the charge against you?"

"Yes, I do. But I said and did nothing to intentionally offend the tenets of Islam." I spoke slowly, Jamie remembers, wanting to pronounce each word correctly in the local dialect.

"You are not permitted to defend yourself," shouted one of the university deans. "You are here to understand why it is you are facing 10 years in prison and to learn what happens to infidels who spread lies about religion among idealistic students."

Leaning forward in his chair to deliver his vitriolic remarks, the dean did little to hide his hatred for myself and the other two Christians who taught in the predominantly Muslim university in Asia. There was little doubt in my mind that he was the one who had gone to the Islamic leadership of the city and filed the charges against us.

Ten years in a foreign prison. The very real possibility of that struck me with a force that made it difficult to breathe. I felt as if the room was closing in on me and at any moment I might faint.

Why was this happening? I had left a successful career in the United States as a police officer to follow God into full-time missions, and where do I find myself? Facing prison. The irony of the situation pained me....

"May I be permitted to say something?"

An audible gasp escaped from several in the room.... I recognized the speaker as the newly appointed dean of the teacher training division of the university....

"As most of you, I have just completed my Ph.D. from a university in the United States and am now a dean." The man spoke with perfect English when announcing his laudable accomplishment, in an effort I surmised, to establish his right to refute the accusing dean. The florid cheeks of the other proved that he had been effective.

"When I arrived in the United States as a new student, I was accompanied by my wife and daughter. As you can guess, I was terrified and my English was not very good.... Then one evening, two young men knocked on my door. Without even waiting for me to speak, they told me they understood how difficult it was coming from another country and not understanding the culture and language. They said they would take me around campus and show my wife where to shop and help me in any way they could. And they did. Those two men saved my career, and they didn't even know who I was."

“And then,” he continued after a brief pause, “you know what they did? They invited me to a Bible study. They were Christians. And I went to the study with them every Wednesday night for three years.”

The room was completely still.... I held my breath. What was the newly appointed dean doing?

“Now, isn’t it the dream of every professor and dean in this room to attend and obtain a graduate degree from a foreign university?... I’ll tell you who will help you. People, Christian people, like this.” He pointed a slender finger in my direction and when our eyes met, I detected the slightest hint of a smile.... “What does it tell them about our faith, if we put them in jail when they’re here?”...

The meeting was adjourned.

This is the story of Jamie Winship, who was being accused and facing ten years in prison. Jamie said, “When I think of those two college students, two people I will never know this side of glory, I am reminded that no act of obedience to God is ever trivial. My life was protected because those two young men weren’t too tired or too busy to knock on the door of a needy Muslim neighbor and share the love of Christ.” (Jamie Winship, “Surprise Witness,” *Christian Reader*, November/December 2000)

God sees the Dorcas of this church. God uses the Dorcas of this church.

At the great messianic banquet, that banquet in the Kingdom of God, Dorcas is going to be sitting ahead of us all – not because her gift was flagrant and flamboyant, but because she had the simple heart of a servant and consistently worked – day in and day out – for the people of God in such a way that she was irreplaceable.

Clickety-clack, ziiiip, ding. A 60-second summary. What will be written about you? What will be written about me?

Some of you so serve others that, indeed, you are indispensable to this, your family of faith. There are others of you who are so self-serving and self-absorbed that when your day comes, quite candidly, this community of Christ won’t experience any loss with your absence because, quite frankly, you did nothing when you were present.

Clickety-clack, ziiiip, ding. The 60-second summary is coming for us all.