

We live in a very large, suffering world. There are incredible hurts. Turn on the news. Listen to the stories. In the last three days, here are just a few of the stories of the pain and the misery that swirls around us: *Gary Ridgeway pled guilty to killing 48 women in Seattle, WA*. In Atlantic City, *a casino parking garage underconstruction collapsed killing three and injuring 20*. In FL *a man plowed his pickup into a group of motorcycle riders and killed two*. Every day there is the story of another bombing in Bagdahd, or Israel, or Indonesia.

I looked online as I was preparing for this message. The numbers differ a bit from site to site. No one knows precisely how many people there are on planet earth today. Most of the sites put the numbers somewhere around 6:3 billion. That's a lot of people. Each person on this planet has a story. I have no doubt that some are doing quite well, but I am also convinced that many . . . perhaps most have their own story of pain and suffering to tell.

It may be the story of trying to find food for your children when there is no food. It may be the story of fleeing from the soldiers who have come to pillage, rape and plunder. It may be the story of young parents who have died form AIDS and now their children wander as beggars scavenging in the streets. It may be the people we know who are dying of cancer, or who struggle with mental illness, or who wonder if its safe to go home at night because they live in a dysfunctional and abusive family.

In this world with so much pain, so much hurt, so much misery, it's very tempting to just shrug and attempt to ignore the pain. Let's just find another television show with the canned laugh tracks to help us forget, if even for a moment how difficult life can really be. After all, what can one person do . . . what can one person do that would really make any kind of difference?

As we think about all those people, it's tempting to think of ourselves as insignificant . . . as an accident . . . as a speck of cosmic dust. Do we believe, dare we believe that our lives have meaning and purpose? What difference in the midst of all the pain, the suffering and the misery could one person possibly make?

Today we continue the series that we have worked on for the past several months *The Church Alive – Lessons from the Book of Acts*. This morning I would like to look with you at another of the heroes of the early Christian church. That is a lady by the name of Tabitha (we probaby know her better by her Greek name – Dorcas). At first glance, Dorcas hardly seems like a hero. For one thing, we really don't know much about her. Was she old . . . or young? Was she married . . . or single? What family . . . if any did she have? We can speculate, but we just don't know.

The scripture does say (9:36) *She was devoted to good works and acts of charity*. Now, I don't know everything that means, but I wonder . . .

- That probably means that Dorcas was not just living for the weekend, so she could go out and party.
- That probably means that she wasn't spending every spare minute down at the mall thinking about that new dress she wanted.
- That probably means that she wasn't spending hours out at the village well passing along

juicy bits of gossip about her neighbors.

- I suspect that it also means she was not just dreaming about the day when she would be moving into a *bigger* house in a *better* neighborhood.
- I suspect it probably means that she did not have a lot of time to be pointing out the flaws and failures of others.

Dorcas was *devoted to good works and acts of charity*. She was a woman with a needle . . . and she used it! Perhaps in the grand scheme of things, it might seem like Dorcas really was not making all that much of a difference. After all, what difference could one woman make with just a needle and thread.

But then Dorcas became ill . . . so ill that she died. As was the custom, she was washed for burial and laid out in an upper room. The story does not mention a grieving family. It does mention a grieving community. The believers knew that Peter was nearby . . . so they sent for Peter.

Now, I am very aware that a funeral can be a very difficult time. It's difficult to part with a loved one, especially when the death comes long before we think it should. At the same time, there is often much to celebrate at funerals, especially when we gather to remember a rich, full life lived in the presence of God, and lived in service to others. As a pastor, as I prepare for a funeral, as I lead funerals, I encourage the sharing of memories. I enjoy listening to the stories that are told. Some of those memories may be painful. But there is often great benefit in telling the stories of who that person was, and what they said and what they did. Telling the stories helps us to remember how God was present in that person's life.

When Peter came, the widows . . . those who had benefited the most from the kindness and generosity of Dorcas came and started to tell Peter their stories about Dorcas. Now it seems unlikely that Dorcas was a preacher, or a Bible study leader. It doesn't appear that she ever led the congregation in singing, or even served as an usher. Those are not the memories that came to mind at her death. Her friends showed Peter the clothing and the garments she had made. No, the memories mentioned was the incredible good that she did just being who she was a seamstress devoted to serving God and others.

My suspicion is, that if you were to talk with Tabitha, and to ask her what spiritual gift she had, she just might have had difficulty even naming it. I'm just a seamstress. I just make and fix clothing. Yet, Dorcas, with her needle made a tremendous difference in the lives of those who knew her. If God is in our giving, then it makes all the difference in the world.

Of course there are many other stories that we could talk about. We could talk about a young boy named David, the youngest in his family, given the menial job of tending sheep. But he did it and did it well, and God called him to be the king of Israel. We could talk about an old man who thought his best years were long gone, destroyed by some foolish mistakes of his youth. Yet God called Moses to lead his people from the bondage of Egypt to freedom. We could talk about a young Albanian nun, who heard God's call to care for the sick and the dying. She said yes to that call and in so doing not only ministered to thousands but inspired thousands of others to also live selflessly for others. (We know her today as Mother Theresa).

There are hundred's . . . thousands of persons that we could talk about and the difference that their life made because they allowed the Spirit of God to work through them. But this morning, I would like to invite you to think of a very specific person.

Think of someone who has made a difference for good in your own life. Perhaps it was a teacher who helped you to realize that you really could learn algebra, or a coach who taught you how to hide a fastball, or a friend who was there for you in the midst of a very dark, very difficult time. Perhaps it was a parent who still believed in you, when you were not even sure you believed in yourself.

For most of us, at one time or another in our lives, someone was there for us . . . at least one person was there for us . . . some of us have had the blessing of a number of different persons being there. This morning, I would like you to think of one person. I hope that somewhere along the line you have taken time to say, "Thank You!" If not, I would encourage you to take time this week, to write a note, or to make a phone call, or to stop in for a visit. Thank God for people who make a difference. Thank God for those persons who helped to make us who we are today.

I first heard the following story a long time. I think it says a great deal about the difference that one person can make. It is the story of two men who were down by the beach. The one watched as the other approached from some distance away. As he watched, he saw that every so often the second man would stop, bend down, pick something up and throw it out into the ocean. As he got closer he saw that the man was picking up starfish and throwing them back into the sea.

As they approached, the first man cynically said to the second, "You know, what you are doing really doesn't make any difference." "Ah, but you're wrong", said the second man, as he bent down, picked up yet another starfish and tossed it out to sea. "It does to that starfish."

What about us? What difference is God asking us to make in the life of someone else. Perhaps you are saying, "But God I'm not a public speaker. I have trouble even praying alone, let alone with someone else. What can I do?"

Are you a truck driver? Be a truck driver for God. Do you own a business? Be a business owner for God. Are you a student? The Bible says, "Study to show yourself a worker approved by God." Are you a homemaker? You have an awesome opportunity and responsibility to be a godly influence in the life of your children. Are you retired? Did you know that word *retire* is not in the Bible? Let me express a personal concern . . . I have seen too many persons raise their children, finish their working days and then cut themselves off from God's people. Retirement provides the perfect opportunity to serve God in ways that are just not possible when you are raising children and getting up every day at five in the morning to go to work.

The only ability necessary to God is our availability. I am only one. But I am one.

God my prayer is today, that I can make a difference for you and for good in the life of one other person today.

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