

LEAVING A GAP THAT MATTERS

Well, well, well.

Here we are last time I'm going to speak to you guys.
For twenty years my message has pretty much been the same.

Grow the heck up,
quit screwing around, and
get serious about following Jesus.

But this is my last shot at y'all.
What should I tell you,
them men of our church?

My last message is what we can learn from a woman.
A woman who wasn't well known in her own time
and who you don't hear much about today.

She's what you might call a bit player –
a minor character who shows up in the Bible for just a few verses.
God's story of salvation
could easily be told without her even being mentioned.

But she's in the Bible for a reason.
And I'm really glad she is.
There's a lot we can learn from her.

Her name is Dorcas.
Being a minor character in the Bible,
there's much we don't know about her.

Her Hebrew name was Tabitha.
In Greek it's Dorcas.
Both words are translated the same in English:
Gazelle or graceful.

So we know her name.
But we don't know if it fit her well.

When she walked into a room did people catch their breath
and say, "Who is that lovely creature?"
And when someone whispered, "That's Gazelle,"
they said, "Well, of course it is.
Look how beautifully she carries herself.
Who else could she be?"

Or, I mean it's possible,
her parents would have named her when she was young,
that her name didn't fit her at all.

Kind of like if my parents had named me Butch.
Robby, that's what I grew up with.
Little Robby Renfro.
I carried that pretty well.

I've even been able to pull off Rob.

But Butch,
dude, there's just no way I could ever make that work.
Can you imagine how many times I would have gotten
laughed at, picked on probably beat the heck up
if my parents had named me Butch?

Beautiful name Gazelle.
But we don't know anything about her appearance.

We know she lived in Joppa.
That was the ancient seaport for Jerusalem,
thirty-five miles away.

But we don't know if she had been born there
or if she had fled Jerusalem after the martyrdom of Stephen
and Christians began to be persecuted there.

We don't know anything about her parents.
We don't know how old she was when she died
or how she came to put faith in Christ.

When you're famous,
all those little details
become terribly interesting,
and they get reported and remembered.

What you wore,
where you went,
who you're dating.

They're all written up in People magazine
as if there's nothing more important in all the world.

But when you're not a celebrity or
a titan of industry or
a politician –
when you're a regular person,
caring for your family and your friends,
when that's what you do with your life –
well, often the world doesn't notice or care.

10 years ago or so on June the 11th,
I called my mother just to talk.
After a few moments she said,
Do you know what today is?

No, I said.
“It's your grandfather's birthday.”
At the time Mom was 83;
her dad has been gone for 50 years,
and all of her siblings were dead.

“It’s your grandfather’s birthday,”
she said.

“And it seems strange to think
that I’m the only person alive who remembers that – or him.

Just a month ago after hearing me talk about my dad when we looked
at Mr. Holland’s Opus,
Larry Batton did some genealogical investigative work,
and he sent me a picture of the application for my grandfather’s headstone.

He had served in the Marine Corps
and the application was made through the American Legion.

Here it is.

Picture of Application

Joe Nelson Eidom.
Born 6-11-1893.
Date of death: Jan 28, 1952.

“It’s your grandfather’s birthday,”
mother said.

“And it seems strange to think
that I’m the only person alive who remembers that – or him.
And it may not be long,
and then even I won’t be around to remember.”

That day has come.
Mother died at the age of 91 on February 23,2020.
Buried next to my father.

Picture of mom and dad’s grave.

I’m the oldest grandchild in my family.
I was born in 1955,
three years after my grandfather died.
I never met him.
So, I don’t remember him.
Nobody alive does.

That's how it's going to be with most of us, isn't it?
Here for awhile – and then gone.
Remembered by a few.
For a time.
And then they'll be gone.
And nobody will remember.

But that's ok.
That's the lesson we learn from Dorcas.
If we do life right,
 if we live for what matters,
that's ok.

Because there's something much more important than being famous.
 That's being faithful.
There's something better than being seen by men
 and that's being a servant to God.
And trusting that when everyone else has forgotten,
 he will remember.

Here's how Dorcas' story begins.

Acts 9.36-39: In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor. About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!" Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.

There's much we don't know about Dorcas.
But we do know some things.

1. Dorcas was a disciple of Jesus Christ.

That's the first thing we're told about her.

Acts 9.36: In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas), who was always doing good and helping the poor.

The Greek word used to describe her is mathaetria.

It's the feminine form of mathaetace – the word translated as disciple.

And this is the only place in the New Testament that we find this word in its feminine form.

Usually, you would expect the word believer or servant.

So, this word was chosen purposefully and carefully.

When Luke wanted to tell us about Dorcas,
he said she was a mathaetria,
a disciple.

A disciple was a student, a learner,
and in the context of first century Judaism,
it meant not just someone who had studied a teacher's ideas,
but someone who had studied a teacher's life.

Another translation for the word, even better, is follower.
She was a follower of Jesus.

The verb manthano – its original meaning was “to direct one's mind to something.”

Here it would be used to convey
that Dorcas had purposefully focused her mind upon the life and teachings of
Jesus so she could be faithful to his teachings
and live a life that looked like his.

And she was beautifully successful.

The same verse tells us “she was always doing good and helping the poor.”
Those words remind us of how Peter describes the life of Jesus in Acts 10.

Acts 10.38: “God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and he went around doing good.”

And when we read that she clothed the widows and cared for the poor,
our minds can't help going to the words of Jesus when he said in

Matthew 25: I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you took me in. I was naked and you clothed me. ... For whatsoever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.

Dorcas was a disciple of Jesus Christ.
She studied his teachings and his life.
She modeled her life after his.
And in the ways that matter most,
she was like her Lord.

Something else we know about her

2. Dorcas was missed.

When she died, others wept and mourned.
This was a life that had meant something.

There are people when they die,
honestly, they don't leave much of a gap.
These are people who may have accomplished much in the eyes of the world,
and they may leave a hole to fill on some company's org chart,
but they don't leave much of a hole in the hearts of others.

There are people when they die
and the response is:
What a gifted person.
What an impressive performer.
He'll be a tough act to follow.

But no one says,
I can't imagine my life without him.
No one stands around and says,
look what he did for me.

No one says, I'm the man I am today,
because of how he invested his life into mine.
No ministry in the church,
that says, What are we going to do without him?
No needy persons who say,
What are we going do now – he was the one who loved us?

Makes me wonder,
what kind of gap will I leave when I'm gone.
What kind of gap would there be
if you went to be with the Lord today?

Nice guy,
successful businessman.
Too bad.
Let's move on.

Or would there be a hole in the lives and the hearts of people?

What happens in this story is really very curious.

They prepare Dorcas' body for burial,
and then they go to get Peter.

I wonder why?

One thought is,
they believed he would raise Dorcas from the dead.

That could be.
They didn't want to let her go.
They couldn't imagine their lives without her.
And they believed Peter could raise her from the dead.

Problem with that view is that up to this point,
Peter had never resurrected anyone.
He had done some healings.
But he hadn't raised anyone from the dead.

Another possibility is that they wanted him to say some words,
you know,
conduct the funeral.
That could be.

It could explain why they said,
Please come at once.

Jewish burials were to be conducted within 24 hours of death.
And Lydda where Peter was staying was 10 miles away.

So there was a 10 mile walk to get him.
And then there would be a ten mile walk back to Joppa.

20 miles in a day's time.
It was do-able.
But Peter would have to come right away.

There's a third possibility.

They just thought someone should know.
Someone like Peter,
someone who knew Jesus,
he should know about this life,
how dedicated she had been to his friend Jesus,
how faithfully she had taken his message to heart,
and how beautifully she had copied his life.

I've been around family members and friends like that
when their loved one died.
They wanted someone to know.

They wanted me to know –
this was a life,
maybe not famous,
but this was a life that got it.

This was a life of substance,
this was a life that really mattered.
And someone should know.

When people want me to know
and when they want me at their loved one's funeral
to tell who he really was
and the difference he made
and the fact that there's a gap, a hole,
that seems like no one else can fill it –

it's never about an impressive performance
or worldly success
or tremendous talents.

It's always about service and caring and sacrifice.
It's always about putting others first.

It's always about love.

You become famous because of talents and success and performance.
But you become someone who matters in the lives of people
only when you love.

When I was pastoring a church on the west side of Houston,
we had an exceedingly talented young man
who was our youth pastor
and who often sang solos at church.

Nathan Villarreal.

(Picture)

His musical abilities were really spectacular
and he had a charisma when he performed that was compelling.
He was the star of every musical the church put on and
the guy that everyone wanted to sing at their wedding.

When for family reasons he had to move to central Texas,
I thought this is a real loss for our church.
But not as much as a teenager in the youth group.

His name was John
and John was struggling.
His father had walked out of his and his mother's lives
and John was a good kid who just couldn't stay out of trouble.
But he had found a home in our youth group.
A place where he didn't have to act out to be accepted.
It was a place that Nathan created for him
by caring for him and listening to him and spending time with him.

His mother told me,
"John says now that Nathan is going,
we have to leave the church.
When I asked him why,"
she said, "John told me we had to leave
because no one will ever love us like Nathan did."

We might be known for our gifts and our ability to perform.
We might be a hard act to follow.
But what matters most,
what makes us matter to others,
is love.

You've heard me talk before about
a summer youth director who came to my church
in Texas City when I was in high school.
He was in his early 20's.

He wasn't cool,
wasn't charismatic,
wasn't a big personality.

But he led most of us into a real relationship with Jesus.
I once asked my brother,
Why do you think Eddie had such an impact on our lives?

And he said,
Because when you spoke with Eddie,
he made you feel like you were the most important person in the world.
You felt, you knew, that he cared about you.

Mark was always wilder than I was.
He told me that one night that summer,
he had a dream.
And in his dream on one side there was Jesus, calling to him.
On the other side, there was the devil, calling his name.

Mark felt torn and pulled and afraid.
He felt that his soul was in the balance
and the decision he made would determine his destiny.
And he didn't know what to do.

In desperation
he looked for help and there was Eddie.
And in his dream leapt into Eddie's arms
where he knew he'd be safe.

See, even before we got Jesus figured out,
we had Eddie figured out.
And what we had figured out is that that he loved us
and it was safe to be with him.
And it was Eddie who brought us to Christ.

What makes us matter in the lives of others,
more than our competence,
more than our knowledge,
more than our success –
it's love.

People never forget the love that
listened to them and
understood them and
stayed with them when others walked away.

And they want someone to know.

That's what I think was going on when Dorcas' friends called for Peter.

They showed him the robes and the clothing she had made for them.

Widows,

 who were often poor

 and who were often left with no income and no government assistance,

Dorcas had loved them.

And they wanted someone to know.

Someone should know.

 about this life,

 her life.

Someone who loved Jesus like she did,

 someone who loved us like she did –

people should know.

Rob, tell people that our mother never bought anything new for herself

 so we could dress like the other kids at school.

Tell them that dad worked two jobs

 so we could go to college.

Tell them that my brother gave up a huge promotion

 because he didn't think it was the right time to move his kids.

Tell them that my wife was the kindest, most encouraging woman any man could
 be married to – and that the only reason I did what I did is because she believed
 in me.

Meeting with people,

 talking about their loved one's funerals,

I've been told and asked to tell all of those things.

Because when people have been loved,

 they remember and

 they want someone to know.

See it's not really about being famous or well known.

It's about did we love when we lived.
 Did we love in such a way
 that people said, "There's a hole in our hearts.
 And somebody should know."

Something else we can surmise about Dorcas is that she

3. Dorcas had experienced her own pain.

Nowhere in this story is her husband mentioned.
 We don't hear anything about her children.

In all likelihood,
 Dorcas was a widow herself.

She knew what the pain of losing a husband was like.

Men, practically every one of us has suffered some loss.
 Maybe we've lost
 a loved one,
 a dream,
 a job,
 a marriage,
 our health.

May be the pain we have suffered with children who have made mistakes
 and broken our hearts.

May be the loss of self-respect we bear
 because of the lives we've lived.

All of us have experienced pain.
 And if you haven't, you will.

All of us have some pain within us.
And every man you meet has
 some pain,
 some loss,
 some deep regret
within his heart.

And when we suffer,
 it's so easy to turn inward,
 instead of outward.
Not to speak about it,
 not to share it.

It's so easy to say no one understands.
 No one knows how I feel.

That would have been a temptation for Dorcas.
Turn inward,
 become angry and bitter.
Withdraw.

That can happen.
If the pain is great enough
 and the loss is devastating enough.

And I've seen people do it.
They crawl into a cave
 or they disappear in a bottle
 or they run away from everyone and everything
 and every reminder of what life once was
 and what they once hoped it might be.

And they die inside.

Not Dorcas.

Instead of saying no one knows how I feel.
She looked at widows
 who had lost their husbands and whose hearts were breaking,
and she said, "I've been there.
 I know how you feel."

Instead of saying,
 No one understands what I'm going through,
 no one understands how lost and alone and afraid I am,
she saw others who had suffered the same loss,
and said, "You're not alone,
 because I understand."

Sometimes that's enough.
Just someone who cares,
 someone who understands,
 someone who will step into that dark cave
 you have wrapped around you so tight that you thought no one could ever get
 in.

Sometimes it's enough
 if someone will walk into that darkness
 and say you're not alone because I understand.

Years ago a ministry started here.
You probably never heard of it, I'd bet.

It wasn't well-known.
It wasn't a big deal like Renew or Quest or our mission trips.

In fact, it meets in Allen Parlor,
 a room here at the church you may not even know where it is.

It's sometimes referred to as SOS.
That stands for Survivors of Suicide.

A woman in our church lost her son.
He was 31 years old when he took his own life.

He had had one set back after another,
professionally and personally and relationally.
He had struggled with depression,
and like so many of us,
kept it all to himself,
until the pain became too much for him
and he put an end to his life.

Lynda felt everything a mother would feel.
Shock, grief, sorrow, guilt.
Devastation.

There's nothing harder.

She didn't know where to go
or what to do.
So she started reading,
learning about depression and suicide,
and trying to find some bit of healing.

Reading the stories of other survivors helped.
After a year,
she got up the courage to go to a meeting.
And she found people who understood and who cared.

And over time,
she began to believe that every day wouldn't be so dark
and every moment wouldn't be consumed with pain.
And by God's grace and the help of others
who had been where she was,
more healing came into her life.

After a year,
a need came up for an SOS group in South County.
And Lynda said she would start a group here.

And for twelve years they've been meeting.
And on Tuesday nights what goes on in that parlor,
it's not famous,
but it is beautiful
and it is healing
and it is hope
and it is life,
because one woman who was hurting didn't say no one understands my pain,
instead she said, I understand your pain.
And I will be here for you.
And the best I can,
I will love you until you heal.

Sometimes people came to remember a sad anniversary
now years after the fact.
Sometimes people came whose pain was so fresh and so overwhelming
that's all they felt.

But someone who cared was there for them.
Someone who had suffered and lost,
and who had said,
my pain will not be in vain.
I will use it to help others.

We usually want to help people based on our successes and our victories
and our achievements.
But I promise you that you will have the greatest impact on others
when the help and the comfort and the lessons you offer
come from the times
when your struggles were deep and long,
not from the times when your successes were quick and easy.

People who are hurting and lost,
 the last thing they need are simple, pat solutions
 from someone who has never walked a road that has brought him to his knees.

What they need is someone who has the wisdom and the understanding
 that comes from having been there in the darkness
 and having stared into the abyss himself.

And then with compassion and integrity says,
 There is a way out,
 you can come through this.

And that does not happen if you have never suffered,
 never questioned,
 never doubted,
 never had to keep walking
 when the night was dark
 and the road was uncertain
 and all you had to hold onto was the hand of God.

But if you've been there
 and you've made it through,
 you have an incredible gift to share.
 And it is the gift of authenticity and spiritual authority.

2 Corinthians 1.3-4: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the
 Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our
 troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we
 ourselves have received from God.

People often ask to know God's will for their lives.
 Sometimes the answer is found in your wounds.

If God has brought you through,
 you have a gift to share.
 And maybe even a responsibility to share it.

4. Dorcas was practical.

1 John 3.18: Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

Love is more than emotions and sympathy.

Eventually, love is something we give,
something we do,
something that is practical
and that meets a need.

When I was on staff at First Methodist in Houston,
I would preach at the downtown campus whenever Dr. Hinson was out of town.
A woman, Sarah Jane,
heard me speak one morning.
She was in the hospital that Sunday.
She had broken her femur in four places
and was recovering from a pulmonary embolism.
In her late 70's.
Her husband had died and she had been alone for years.

A couple of years later, she sent me a beautiful card
and in it she wrote: I still remember hearing you preach that Sunday
when I thought that I was worthless
because I became handicapped and
I couldn't serve God like I had in the past.
You preached about being an encourager.

And God touched my heart
and told me I could be an encourager.

She wrote that she had always been a photographer.
And she said that she took to heart what God spoke to her that day
and she began taking pictures and making them into cards.
And then she would send them to people who were doing God's work
and preaching his word.
Just a little way that I can be an encourager
for people who are trying to help others and be faithful to God.

Inside her notes were words of encouragement
and a reminder that she was praying for me
and for one of my sons that I told her about.

The smallest things can mean so much.
When they come from a heart of love,
when someone takes the talents God has given them,
and shares them in a practical, concrete way.

You have some ability.
There is some gift God has given you,
some skill you have developed,
some expertise that others need.
Some word you can speak.

For Dorcas, it was an ability to make dresses and robes and clothing
so that women who were alone and dependent and poor,
felt beautiful and loved and worthy.

That's how she made her love for Christ and for others
practical and real.
For you it will be something else.

But there is some gift God has given you
that others need
and God expects you to share.

And when you do,
you will become much more than famous.
You will become loved
and people will not just admire you
they will be grateful for you
and God will be pleased.

Let me tell you about someone who has left a hole in my heart
and then share a final story with you.

Ted White was a member of our church,
 along with his wife Pam and their children,
 when I was here in the 80's and for many years after that.
 I was in my late 20's when we met.

Ted had a law firm downtown and
 when they started coming to our church,
 they weren't really believers.
 But they both came to real faith in Christ.
 And Ted became an encourager and a champion for me,
 but that doesn't mean he didn't tell me the truth
 when I needed to hear it.

Picture of Ted White

This July 3rd, Ted went to be with the Lord at the age of 74
 after a battle with cancer.
 They were living in Tennessee
 and we had been in touch with them.
 We received a message the day before his death
 that his time was short.
 Peggy and I thought about writing a letter to send to him,
 but instead we sent emails,
 fearing that a letter might not get there in time.
 Fortunately that's what we did
 because our emails arrived just hours before his death.

Dear Ted – and you are dear to me –

This may ramble on. So, to make sure I don't bury the lead – I am incredibly grateful God brought you into my life. I will hold you in my heart forever, until the day I meet Jesus, thankful for all the ways you loved, taught and encouraged me.

Of course, I'll never forget when I came to your home for the first time. Y'all had been to the church a few times and it was our policy to drop by for a short visit, just to say "thanks for coming and we'd love to see you again." Your parents were visiting. You met me at the door, invited me in, and introduced me to your parents with the words, "This is Rob Renfroe. He and Ed Robb have the best GD church you've ever seen." ("GD" being my language, not yours.) And the night y'all had us over for dinner and you brought out the bottle of Opus to share with us, only I had promised Ed that I would not drink with the members. After you described it in detail and told us how excited you were to share it with us, you said, "So, what do you think?" My response was to smile and say, "Pour

the wine!” That night about 11:30 (someone or some two at that dinner liked to talk), you asked, “What do we need to do to join the church?” I wanted to say, “Just swear you won’t tell Ed Robb that I had a drink with you, and I’ll give y’all the vows of membership right now!)

You had a way of putting me, and I’m sure others, in moments that were uncomfortable – and WONDERFUL – loving us and challenging us at the same time. The very thing a friend should do, but that few have the exquisite talent to do the way you do. You and Pam were so generous with us – early on you flew us to Galveston in your plane and put us up at the San Luis, which was probably the most extravagant gift anyone had given us at the time. Even more, you listened to me, helped me believe in my gifts and my calling, and you corrected me. I have told the story in church twenty times how after a building meeting you told me rightly that I had wasted everyone’s time, finishing with the statement, “If you worked for me, right now I would be firing you.” I didn’t like hearing that at the time. But it took me only a short while to realize how right you were. Nobody was paying me to be smarter than or to know better than anyone else. I was the servant of the church and doing what I was asked to do, even when I didn’t see the point, was part of being faithful to God and his people. That lesson made me a better person and pastor for the rest of my life.

You may remember that when we moved to Atlanta you called me to see how I was doing. Not great, was my answer. Things weren’t happening fast enough, some folks had let me down and I was discouraged. You replied, “You’re in a wilderness.” “I know,” I said, “I just told you that.” “No,” you said, “wilderness – like in the Bible. You’re the pastor, figure it out.” I took that to heart. Spent hours studying the wilderness in the Bible and preached a series of sermons based on the experiences of God’s people in the wilderness. Later that series became my second book, “A Way Through the Wilderness.” I think more than any other book of mine, it’s the one that has helped people most. It still sells and churches still use it as a group study to help people get through difficult times in their lives. Thank you for that.

One last memory. At your son Kendall’s wedding, what struck me profoundly was how deeply he and his friends loved you. How much they respected you and admired you and how grateful they were for you. I learned that several of those young men had been kicked out of their homes because of the trouble they were getting into, but you made a place for them in your home and in your heart. And they loved you like a father.

I’ve done over 580 weddings. And I remember how they felt about you because it was so profoundly moving and because it was different than anything I had ever seen. You have much more to be proud of. But if that’s all you were to leave on this earth – the fact that you had lived in such a way that young men, your son and his friends, wanted to be like you because of how you had lived, that just might be enough.

You were bigger than life to me. Your intellect, your energy, your laugh, your insight, your success. Sometimes it was overpowering, well many times. And sometimes it was frightening. But it was always good, always amazing.

Hearing about your cancer and now that you are in hospice, what I know to be true hits home again. No matter how large our personality or how big our swath, in the end life is bigger than we are. It will have its way with us. But thank God you know and I know that Jesus is Lord over life and he is Lord over death. And when our life has come to an end and when death has done its worst, all it has done is bring us into the presence of the One who is truly bigger than life, the One who saved us, the One who loves us and has promised to receive us.

So, I rambled a bit. Just to make sure my main message doesn't get lost – I am incredibly grateful God brought you into my life. I will hold you in my heart forever, until the day I meet Jesus, thankful for all the ways you loved, taught and encouraged me.

With the greatest of respect and the deepest of affection,

Rob

Jacques Monod,

was a famous French geneticist and Nobel prize winner.

He was on a panel being interviewed about science and religion and the meaning of life.

Mother Teresa was also on the panel.

The professor said that he believed

that our destinies were determined by our genes.

They shape and direct our character and our actions and even our attitudes.

Consequently, there is no such thing as real human freedom or meaning.

As he held forth on this theme,

Mother Teresa sat with her eyes closed and her hands folded, evidently in prayer.

After Monod finished his remarks,
the interviewer asked Mother Teresa her thoughts.

She looked up and replied:

Me?

I believe in love.

And then she bowed her head
and continued her prayers.

Me?

I believe in love.

I believe that being famous before the audience of the world
isn't nearly as important as being faithful before an Audience of one.

I believe that making a big name for yourself while you're here
doesn't compare to leaving a big hole in the hearts of others when you're gone.

And I believe the way you do that is love.