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THE DREAM FUNERAL Acts 9:36-42

I recently had another frustrating experience of the travails of dealing with corporate America. Laurie and I have a vacation planned for later this year. We used frequent flyer miles to obtain tickets for our flight. Then a couple of weeks ago we received an email from the airline informing us they had made a change to our flight. This was no minor adjustment to the flight time, like changing by an hour or less. It was a major change that would foul up our plans. So I called the airline and waded through the interminable menus to finally get an actual person to talk to. I explained the problem to the woman I spoke with and she went to work trying to solve the problem, to no avail. She finally said she could refund all of our frequent flyer miles and we could start over. I told her that would be fine. We could start over and come up with another plan that would work fine for us.

She tapped away at her computer and informed me she had taken care of the problem. I thanked her. However, later I was puzzled when I received no email notifying me of the change, which the airline is usually fanatical about. I figured it would just take some time for the changes to work through their system. But after another day passed I checked our account and learned that though our reservation had been canceled our miles had not been credited back to us. I gave it some more time, but nothing happened. So I called the airline back. After once again painfully negotiating their torturous telephone procedure I finally got a representative to talk to and explained the problem to her. She informed me that the airline never refunds miles over the phone. Contrary to what the previous agent had told me this was not possible to do. I had to go to a web site and fill out a refund request form to accomplish that. I said, "Then why did your other representative tell me that she had done it?" She said she didn't know, but that the only way for me to get my miles back was to make the request online. She said I would have to put in the actual ticket number, which is a 14 digit number, not the 6 letter record locator. She read the number to me and I copied it down. I was frustrated. Why did that first woman tell me she had done something when she hadn't and even couldn't?

I went to the website, filled out the form, and was informed that the miles had already been refunded. Oh, great news. I checked my account. No they hadn't. Earlier Laurie had written down our ticket number and she had that in another place, so I compared it with the number the airline rep had given me. She had given me the wrong number! I typed in the correct number and it worked! A new

screen popped up and informed me that in order to get those miles refunded I had to call the airline at the number that I had already called twice! Unbelievable! The lady on the phone said I could only get my miles back on the website and the website said I could only get them back from the lady on the phone! That was when I realized that my faith clearly had not saved me because I was in hell!

Once again I called the airline. This time I didn't mess around with their phone business. I just punched 0. Amazingly it worked. Trying to be as patient as possible I let this new young woman know that I was extremely frustrated. I went through the whole sad tale with her. She was very gracious and told me she would work on it, but she would have to put me on hold. At that point I just wanted someone to help me. I was powerless to fix this, and really needed someone to go to bat for me. To make a long story short, to my immense relief, after a long wait on hold she came back and told me she had solved the problem and the miles were back in my account. Before she got off the phone I checked, and it was true. I thanked her profusely.

As I was going through that frustrating ordeal I just wanted someone to help me. I cannot express how thankful I was for Keisha, the woman who patiently and persistently attacked my problem until she was able to fix it. I tell you that story because if we will only open our eyes we will see that all around us are people who are like me in that instance, in desperate need of someone to help them. Today we will look at the example of a game changer who made it a habit to be the one who lent a hand. Her story is in Acts 9:36-42.

TABITHA MAJORED IN DOING GOOD

The events in this passage took place in the ancient town of Joppa, which was a seaport city that is part of Tel Aviv today. When Jonah went AWOL after God told him to go preach in Nineveh he left Israel on a boat from Joppa.

There was a woman in Joppa named Tabitha who had become a follower of Jesus. Tabitha was her name in Aramaic, which was the native language of first century Jews. It meant Gazelle. The Greek word for gazelle was Dorcas, so she was also called that. The name Gazelle seems like a good one for a woman because it conjures up images of grace and beauty. At least that's what I think of when I think of gazelles. It certainly would seem to be a more fitting name than say "Rhino" or "Moose." Rhino especially seems inappropriate. I can imagine the poor woman saying, "Does this name make me look fat?"

Gazelle indeed was a graceful, beautiful person. We don't know whether she was physically beautiful, but we know that her character was, which is the far more important matter. In fact, as we will see in this story she was an unusually and remarkably beautiful person. Luke says of her in verse 36, "she was always doing good and helping the poor." That is quite a description. He didn't say she occasionally did some nice things for people, nor did he say she often helped them. He said she "always" was doing good for the poor. The grammar of the sentence communicates that it was a continual characteristic. Throughout her life it was happening all the time. The word "always" is important. She went out of her way to help others all the time.

I think of it as her major. When I was in college I majored in math. That meant that I took more math than anything else. I took classes in history, economics, chemistry, astronomy, literature and others, but my main focus was math. That's like Gazelle. She did other things besides doing good for people, but her main focus, the thing that she did most often, the thing she was known for, was helping other people.

One way she helped people is specifically identified in this section of the Bible. She made clothes for widows. Widows were the most vulnerable people in that society because, as we have seen before, they typically had no financial resources and were dependent upon others to care for them. Gazelle went out of her way to help them by making clothes for these women even though she had no physical relationship with them. It is a safe bet that this was only one of many ways she helped people. I believe she also made meals for people who were going through a rough patch. If someone had a baby and needed some help, Gazelle was there. If someone ran short of money Gazelle probably found a way to help a little.

TABITHA MADE A BIG DIFFERENCE

There have been a couple of times in my life when I got discouraged because I felt like I didn't have any friends that much cared about me one way or another. One of those times was while I was in grad school. I had left a vibrant community of Christian friends to go back to school, and found myself with a number of acquaintances, but no real friends. I felt like if I was invited to an event it didn't really matter whether I was there or not. If I didn't go my absence wouldn't be noted.

It felt really bad to believe that I did not matter to anyone. All of us want to know that our presence or absence is a matter of concern for us. There was no question that Tabitha mattered to people. She became ill and eventually died. We can see

how much she mattered to people by what happened after she died. Verse 39 says when she died and Peter came "All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made." They were all grief stricken because of her death.

Another indication of the impact this woman had can be seen in the way the people in the church responded after Tabitha died. In that culture the typical program was to prepare the body of the deceased and quickly bury it. They did not embalm and in the warm Mediterranean climate of that area it was important to bury the body without delay. If they didn't do that things started to get unpleasant, and it didn't take very long. But notice what they did. They washed her body and put it in an upstairs room. They had heard that Peter was in the nearby town of Lydia, so they sent messengers to him asking him to "Please come at once."

Why did they do that? Did they want Peter to conduct a funeral for Tabitha? Knowing it had to happen fast they asked him to come at once. No, that's not why they sent for Peter. They couldn't bear losing this woman. She was so precious to them, she mattered so much to them that they could not bear to let go of her. So they asked Peter to come because they were hoping that somehow he could do something about it. There was no reason for them to think that. By this time a number of followers of Jesus had died. Their deaths were like the deaths of every other person. It was game over. They were gone and they weren't coming back. There was zero reason to think that Peter could do anything about Tabitha's death at that point. Perhaps if he could have come before she died maybe she could have been healed. But death is not something you can heal.

So this appeal to Peter was an act of desperation. Tabitha was so deeply loved by everyone in the church in Joppa that they couldn't stand the thought of going on without her. They had to try something, even if it seemed like the most absurd Hail Mary play in the history of the human race. But Peter did come. And what followed was the most unique funeral service in history. Astonishingly, after sending everyone out of the room, he prayed for Gazelle. She opened her eyes, and when he told her to get up, she did! Gazelle was back!

I think that had to be the best funeral ever. That's the funeral we'd all like to have. It was the dream funeral. It's the funeral we all wish we could have for people we love. Verse 42 says, "This became known all over Joppa, and many believed in the Lord." The only thing surprising about that statement is that it wasn't "all believed in the Lord." Apparently some didn't believe it had actually happened, because how could you not believe in the Lord after that astounding event?

Luke related this story to communicate that the power of God was at work in dramatic ways among the first followers of Jesus and to validate again that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. But the story also highlights the fact that Tabitha was an unusual person who had a huge impact on everyone who knew her because of her compassion for others and her extraordinary efforts to help them in whatever way she could. Those things made her a real game changer for many people.

IMPLICATIONS

GOD HAS CALLED US TO DO GOOD FOR OTHERS

We are not all going to be exactly like Tabitha. She was a unique person, as evidenced by her unique funeral. So we should not expect that we will all be like her. But we can learn from her. We can learn that we can have a big impact on other people by having the kind of servant attitude and compassion for people that she had, even if it is not to the extent that she had it.

Maybe I'm a bit strange, but this story caused me to think about what will happen when I die. How will people be affected by that? What will they say at my funeral? I'm not morbid, and I don't spend a lot of time contemplating my death, but unfortunately there is no avoiding the fact that we are all going to die unless Jesus comes back first. Hey, Lord, the clock is ticking. Any time now would be fine. Anyway, because of my position I have been to more funerals than the average Joe. There typically is a part of the service in which people talk about the deceased. The good news is, people are generally at their most gracious on such an occasion. We're going to sound better at that event than at any other point in our lives.

What do you want people to say about you at your funeral? I know, you probably want them to say, "Hey, look, he's alive." But let's assume that doesn't happen. They will say something about you. What do you hope it will be? Sadly, I have been to several funerals where it seemed there wasn't all that much to say about the departed. How sad it is when people are going to sum up your life and they have to work hard for something meaningful and positive to say. It's really a bummer if all they can come up with is, "For a big guy he didn't sweat much," or "he had by far the best lawn in the neighborhood," or "that guy sure knew how to build up a big bank account." I hope that at my funeral there will be joy among tears and a lot of laughter. I hope people will be saddened by my passing, hence the tears, but that they will rejoice that I am with the Lord and they will have lots of happy memories of me, even recall funny things that cause them to laugh. But I hope they will remember me as a person who loved God and who loved them, who lifted them up, who blessed them and inspired them, and who cared deeply about them. But the

only way they will remember me that way is if I live that way. I want people to remember me as having brought good to their lives, but the only way that can happen is for me to do it!

We may not be exactly like Gazelle, but she was definitely on the right track. God has made it very clear in his word that this is something he wants for us. Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." In verses 8-9 Paul said that we are saved by grace through faith, and that it is a gift of God. In this verse he goes on to tell us that one of the main reasons God has worked to save us is that we might do good works that he already has set up for us to do.

In Matthew 5:16 after Jesus had said we, his followers, are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, he said, "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." In Galatians 6:10 Paul wrote, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

Hebrews 10:24 says, "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." Yes, let's consider that for a moment. I find it interesting that not only are we commanded by God to do good to others, but we are also given responsibility to think of how we can motivate others in the church to do good deeds to others. I wonder how many Christians give much thought to that command.

The norm, honestly, is to view church mostly from the perspective of what's in it for me? Do I like the music enough? Are the pastor's sermons interesting enough for me? Do they have the programs I want for my kids? Are there some people I like there who want to be my friend? God gives us an entirely different view of the thing. He tells us we ought to be thinking about how we can motivate those people at church to love and good deeds. What a radical idea. It is a direct challenge to the selfish, consumer orientation that is natural.

What will spur others on to love and good deeds? How can we motivate them to do good to others the way Gazelle did? It starts with a commitment to be there for them. We are certainly not going to spur anyone to love and good deeds if we are not with them, or if we can only fit them in to our schedule when we don't have anything better or more interesting on our calendar.

God drops this job in our laps. Figure out how to motivate those people in the church to do good deeds the way Gazelle did. I know, I'll preach at them like Rick does. I'll tell them they should be doing good deeds for others. That ought to do it. I'll let you in on a secret. It won't. One of the things that my kids had to endure when they were growing up was having a dad who is a pastor. One of the downsides of that is that a major part of a pastor's job is to preach. So he tends to have an unfortunate tendency to preach sermons to his kids. I learned that my fatherly sermonettes to my kids were mostly useless. I should have noticed how seconds after I launched into an oration their eyes took on this glassy, faraway look. It was a clue that they were hearing nothing. A few years ago before Toby got into med school he was working hard taking all the science classes he had not taken while in college at one point he was exhausted and talked about how hard he was working just to get into med school. He said to me, "I sure wish I'd started on becoming a doctor while I was in college. Why didn't you guys ever suggest that to me?" I got what had to be a curious expression on my face and said, "You don't remember that conversation?" "What conversation?" "Back when you were just starting college we were talking about what you might do in your future and I asked if you'd ever considered being a doctor, because I thought you'd be great at it." He shook his head and said, "I have no recollection of that at all." It didn't go in one ear and out the other because it didn't even go in one ear. It just bounced right off him without penetrating even a millimeter.

I realize I am sort of cutting the ice I am standing on right out from under me here, but lecturing people is remarkably ineffective much of the time. It takes a skilled professional to make it work, so don't try this at home. Leave the futile preaching to me. I'm used to it. There is a better way to motivate people to love and good deeds.

Show them. I have mentioned this before but one of the cardinal rules for writing novels is "show them, don't tell them." I am reading a novel right now that I am struggling to get through because the author frequently violates that principle. It is irritating and boring. I've taken to skipping over sections of the story because the author keeps telling not showing. He's trying to tell instead of show. IKEA believes so much in the show them, don't tell them principle that they don't put written instructions in their products to help with the assembly that is required, they just include pictures of the steps to follow. Of course it's possible that given the state of education in our country maybe they do that because they're afraid we can't read. But that doesn't illustrate my point at all, so ever mind.

Suppose you have been getting increasingly uneasy with your physical condition. You are softer, more overweight than you've ever been. Imagine that someone tells you this is bad for you and that you really need to do something about it. They kind of lecture you about it. Now you feel even more uneasy and maybe guilty in some way, but you don't do much about it. However, imagine that about that time a friend who is in worse shape than you goes on a diet and exercise program and gets into terrific shape. You ask your friend about it and he says he feels better, sleeps better, is more alert, has more energy, and has just had a physical that had his doctor raving about his blood pressure and lab tests. What happens then? You go to work, not because he pushed you to do anything, but because he inspires you. The best way for us to motivate others to love and good deeds is to inspire them by our own example.

DOING GOOD REQUIRES A RADICAL MINDSET

Think about what is natural for us. What are we on this planet to do? We don't verbalize this, but it is natural to think we are mostly here about self preservation. My human nature tells me I am here to take care of me. So it is natural for me to pretty much be pre-occupied with myself and my agenda for my day and for my life. The things I have to do demand my attention. Have you seen the commercials for a car air freshener where they show a guy eating in his car and they talk about the fact that it is easy to go nose blind to the smells in your car? But they show others getting in the guys car and being overwhelmed by massive odors of burgers, pizza, onions and other menu items. He is used to the environment so he can't sense it. He needs to buy the air freshener to improve the ambience. I wish I could come up with an air freshener that has the aroma of doughnuts. Now that would be popular. My point here is that we are so caught up with ourselves that we become deed blind. We don't see how we can help others around us because we are so busy and preoccupied with taking care of ourselves.

We believers in Jesus are told by God to think of life in a totally different way. Philippians 2:3-4 says, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."

Don't do anything out of selfish ambition. In other words, don't do anything with the motive of promoting yourself. Don't be always looking out for your own interests, but look out for the interests of others. That is the exact opposite of how we normally operate. The efficiency experts tell us that what we should do at the beginning of the day is make a list of all the things we have to do today, then rank them from highest to lowest priority. Then start with the highest priority item and

do that, or schedule it in at least, working your way down the list. If we are to do what Paul instructed in that passage we would start with "do good to other people, look out for their interests." That would be our high priority item that would drive what we do that day.

Years ago I was at the end of a day and was just getting ready to head home when Laurie called me. Carissa was at home at this point. She had been driving down to San Diego and had a flat tire. She had pulled into a gas station in Solana Beach. Laurie asked if I could go help her. I got in my car and drove to the gas station. When I got there I opened the trunk and began getting out the tools for changing the tire. To my great chagrin I discovered that a crucial piece of the jack was missing. I had no way to jack the car up, thus no way to change the tire. We carefully searched the trunk thinking the part had to be there, but it wasn't. Now I was stumped. I was wracking my brain for some way to get around this problem, when a tow truck pulled into the gas station. The driver got out, grabbed his jack and headed right for us. I figured Laurie, knowing her husband is mechanically impaired, actually mechanically brain dead, would somehow not be able to change the tire, must have called the tow truck company. I was embarrassed to admit that my wife was right to have zero faith in me, but at the same time relieved because a solution was at hand. The tow truck guy had that car jacked up and the flat tire off in record time. He was impossibly fast. He grabbed that dumb pretend tire they give you these days, put it on the car, and had the whole thing done in a matter of 2 minutes. When he finished as I was gratefully thanking him I got out my credit card and offered it to him as payment. He waved me off, said he didn't need payment, told us to have a good evening, got in his truck and drove away. I called Laurie to tell her the problem was fixed and to thank her for calling the tow truck company. She said, "I didn't call for a tow truck." That guy had been going about his day, doing his job, and saw some guy looking helpless. So he stopped to help this hopeless cause. He wasn't getting paid for it, he wasn't doing his job, he was simply looking out for the interest of someone he'd never met and would probably never see again. As he drove away I noticed the name of his company on the side of his truck. It was Guardian Towing. Guardian? Like in guardian angel? He was not an angel, at least as far as I know, but he was doing what we are called to do.

In Philippians 2:5 Paul wrote, "Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus." Then he talked about how Jesus did not seek glory, ease, position, comfort or power for himself, but he obeyed his Father by becoming obedient to the point of dying on a cross. He was not looking out for his interest when he did that. He was looking out for ours, and that was what drove his entire life.

This is why we are on earth. **We are here to serve.** We aren't here to be rich, to be famous, to be a big success, to be powerful. We are here to do good to others. This is our purpose. It should be the agenda that drives everything we do. Imagine what the effect will be when what drives the way you relate to your spouse, your children, your parents, your boss, your co-workers, the server who waits on you at the restaurant, the stubborn, seemingly mentally challenged and utterly unhelpful clerk at the store where you are trying to purchase an item, the annoying neighbor, your idiot pastor, is to seek to do good to them. Ephesians 2:10 says this is why God created you in Christ Jesus. It is so that you might do good works.

After many years of trying to avoid the matter Laurie and I finally decided it was time to replace the old tile counter tops in our kitchen. I am amazed at how doing one thing in your house causes a cascade of events. Somehow as a result of doing that one thing we are ending up with a new stove, new microwave, new drawers, new garbage disposal so far, with new paint on the way, and who knows what else. But one of the changes that took place involved replacing a hanging lamp over our kitchen table with a recessed light. Several people told us this was an easy thing to do, so Laurie and I decided to tackle that one ourselves. Lord, what fools these mortals be. As is always the case it seems, do it yourself projects seem to have a life of their own and it's a nightmare life. On our second day of this "easy" project we hit a wall. We had to cut a metal joist above our ceiling out of the way and we did not have the tools to do it. Laurie happened to call Laurel Youde about something else and in her conversation asked if they happened to have a hacksaw that we could borrow. They didn't let us borrow the saw. Both Laurel and Lorin came over to our house and Lorin cut that joist out for us. We didn't ask him to do that. He just did it, and then gave us a couple of very helpful directions on how to proceed. Barry Schmidt also weighed in with helpful instruction, and our kitchen project also got a boost from Jeff Anstett. My point here is these people did good deeds and kept us from burning down our house, killing ourselves or failing utterly. To our great amazement the light actually works!

God wants us to always have this is our agenda for our lives. We are to always be on the alert, looking for that opportunity to lend a hand, to give that money, to say those encouraging and supportive words someone needs to hear.

THAT MINDSET REQUIRES COMPLETE SECURITY

The obvious concern here is if I don't mostly look out for my own interests, who will? This is not a practical way of living. It's going to cost me big time. I may not survive living like that. Yes, it likely will cost you. How did it work out for Jesus Christ? It put him on a cross. But he has the temerity to say, "Take up your cross

and follow me." In other words, "you pay the price too." I'm not sure I like that plan. It sounds scary. Yes, it is in a way. But remember that question, "If I don't look out for my interests, who will?" The Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus will.

When I was in my high school years we had some friends named the Ericssons. They loved water skiing. One time we camped out at the beach near Santa Barbara with them. They invited us to try water skiing with them and told us they would teach us. Have you ever thought about how insane the idea of water skiing is? Here, try to stand on this 6 inch wide board on top of the water and hold onto this rope and I'll pull you with my powerboat. Sounds like waterboarding to me. Isn't that a method of torture? I've never been a daredevil. My crazy children have surfed huge waves, rock climbed, white water rafted, and both have jumped out of perfectly good airplanes thousands of feet in the air. They must have gotten it from Laurie. Anyway, I was a little dubious about water boarding. They assured me that it would be great and I would be safe. But here's the thing, the first thing they did was put a life vest on me. That was the guarantee that I wasn't going to drown. That life vest was going to take care of me. If I fell, or I should say when I fell, I was going to float in the water until the boat came to get me out. I had nothing to fear. God is like our life vest. Even as I expend myself in serving others God will take care of me. I am not going to drown.

One thing I guarantee. If you live by Jesus' agenda for your life, you may not get rich, you likely will not become famous, you probably won't gain a position of power, you will be taken advantage of, you will be disappointed by people, you will almost surely get hurt, but you will be a game changer. You will have an effect on the lives of others. If you evaluate from the perspective only of this world and the things of this world, yes you might lose by living by Jesus' agenda for your life. But the promise of God is that the world has the wrong scoreboard, that what you will get is true life. In other words, you will not lose, you will gain. You will gain life eternal, which is fullness of life beginning right now.

The late Brennan Manning in his book *The Signature of Jesus*, tells about a man he knew named Dominique Voillaume, who was a humble man who loved Jesus. He didn't care about the money, the fame, the power or glory of this world. He chose to live in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Paris. He took a job as a night watchman at a factory so he would be free during the day. Each day he went to a park where he befriended and cared for the disillusioned, disenfranchised people there, the addicts and the homeless. Manning says, "he never criticized, scolded or reprimanded them." He accepted them as they were and just tried to care for them

and bring them the love of Jesus. Those people experienced the love and grace of Christ through him. In his journal he wrote, "All that is not the love of God has no meaning for me...I have no interest in anything but the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. If God wants it to, my life will be useful...But the usefulness of my life is his concern, not mine." This was a poor humble man who never did anything noteworthy, anything dramatic, never had a powerful position or powerful friends or any money to speak of. At the age of 54 he was diagnosed with cancer and soon died. They had a simple funeral for him. And 7,000 people from all over Europe attended his funeral because this humble man who sought only to love and serve, had such huge impact. Had Peter been alive someone would have sent for him to see what he could do.