

Her Story Silhouette by Shari House

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Silhouette:

Elvine "Ella" Johannessen was born on March 3, 1894, in Norway to Ole and Bertilda (Lund) Johannessen. Elvine's mother was from the rich and powerful Lund family and at the age of sixteen was disinherited because she married a lowly seaman. Elvine's father was often away at sea, and one day when she was only four years old and her brother, Joseph, five, her childless aunt and uncle on her father's side had Elvine's mother declared incompetent because they didn't like her and snatched the children away. Stunned and feeling she couldn't face more shame, Elvine's mother fled to America instead of asking her family for help. When Elvine's father returned home from sea, he believed the lies about his wife that his brother told him. Elvine and her brother grew up feeling that their parents had abandoned them and that there was some mysterious tragedy being kept secret from them. When Elvine's brother was but 15 he went to America to find his mother. The following year at the age of 15, Elvine also escaped to America. Her mother was waiting for her when she disembarked the ship and for the first time Elvine learned the truth of her mother's love and that she hadn't been abandoned all those year ago.

Elvine found work as a servant girl in a Jewish home on Park Avenue in New York City and began calling herself Ella. Her mistress was kind and cultivated in Ella a love for music, literature, and poetry. Ella faithfully attended the Norwegian Baptist Church where she met a pastor named Elius Tweten. He was five years her senior and quite a serious man who loved to read and study books. He was determined to have her for a wife and three months later on June 18, 1915, they were married. Ella's mother gave her this marital advice, "Take him as he is, and you'll be happy. He loves God, the library, and you - in that order . . . and always make sure to keep your dinner warm in the oven." Ella had opportunity the very next day to put the advice to good use when her husband stayed at the library all day until closing time because he had forgotten that he got married the day before.

Ella's husband did love her dearly and came to rely on her greatly. For the most part, he entrusted the care of their home and the raising of their seven children to her. Because of her husband's meager salary and generous heart towards others, Ella had to be creative to provide for the family and came to rely on God unconditionally. She had a close walk with Him that was evident in every part of her life and always had a hymn or a Bible verse on her heart to help her or her children through every task. When washing clothes, she would sing, "What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus." When correcting her children, she would have them say, "Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." Once, when speaking at a women's conference, her home-dyed hat began dripping color down her forehead. She laughed to herself and said, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine."

After pastoring in Brooklyn, Ella's husband took a position to work as a pastor among the Norwegians in Wisconsin. After that they returned to Brooklyn for a period of time before taking a pastorate at the First Norwegian Baptist Church in Winnipeg, Canada. Their humble house became a haven for the homeless immigrants who often sought shelter and a bite to eat. Neither Ella nor her husband would ever turn anyone away and always made sure to have

a time of reading God's Word and prayer with them before they left. Ella loved and cared for each person who came through her doors.

After a period of time, the Norwegian Baptist Conference asked the Twetens if they'd be willing to be missionaries to the Scandinavian newcomers in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan, and they agreed to go. For the first time they were able to purchase a house, and they immediately opened it up to neighbors and strangers alike. The family often referred to this time as the "Prairie Years." It was a hard life with Ella's husband gone for long periods of time on the preaching circuit. Ella often had to deal with meager funds and a low food supply, but she refused to let the burdens of life overcome her and turned to God for strength during these difficult times. Ella never complained no matter how old and worn the items were that came in the missionary barrels that arrived every once in a while, and she made sure her children didn't complain either. Instead she praised the Lord for providing and instilled in her children a joy of the great beauty around them and the simplicity of life that the Lord had given them which allowed them to spend time serving others. Although the years spent on the Canadian prairie were some of the hardest years, Ella and her children looked back on them as some of the most wonderful. Her example in these hard times stayed with her children their whole lives.

After a time, Ella's husband was asked to return to Chicago to pastor the Baptist Church in Logan Square. They went from the wide-open prairie to a second-story walk-up in the inner city of Chicago. This was a hard adjustment for Ella and the children, but she trusted in God and willingly met the challenge. Inside the walls of their church and their home, many immigrants found hope in times of despair when work and food was scarce, friendship in times of loneliness and separation from family back home, comfort during difficult periods of change in a new land, and encouragement as they dreamed the impossible dream. In 1938, after ministering in Chicago for ten years, Ella's husband was dismissed because the congregation wanted to have a more American style church. This was a hard blow to Ella and her husband, but they knew God must have a plan, and He did. They soon received a request from the First Norwegian Baptist Church back in Brooklyn, where they had started out, asking them to come back. This allowed them to be near Ella's mother once again for which she was grateful.

With some of her children now grown and out of the home, Ella was asked to work with the orphans and became the superintendent of the Norwegian Children's Home. She accepted the offer, and her husband became the home's chaplain. To the amazement of others, Ella made quick work of putting everything in order including all the unruly children. The structure and Biblical principles she lived by daily began to make a change in the children, and they flourished under her love and supervision. One day a young orphan girl brought her a limp plant and begged Ella to not throw it away. When Ella explained that the plant was dead, the girl responded, "Then you must love it back to life, Mother," and she skipped away. Ella repotted the plant in fresh soil, provided it with warmth, sunlight, and water, and then waited. Eventually a new shoot appeared and became a lovely green plant once again. That phrase "then you must love it back to life" was one that resounded in Ella's ears every time a frightened, wilted child was brought to her doorstep. One day some of the orphan boys were discussing what they would do when they turned 18 and had to leave the home. Some spoke of going into the military and others of going to college. Then one boy piped up and asked, "But whom do we come home to when we go away?" Ella was quick to respond, "Boys, you can come home to me. Wherever I am, you can always come home to me."

Even with Ella's tragic childhood and penniless adulthood, she lived a life of fullness. She hardly seemed to remember that she was the granddaughter of an aristocrat and never sought out her wealthy family connections in her home country. When Ella was 57 years old, however, the king of Norway sought her out. He had heard of her work with the Norwegian immigrants over the years and especially her running of the Norwegian Children's Home. He awarded her the "St. Olav's Medal" - the second-highest honor given by the Norwegian government.

On January 14, 1977, at the age of 82, Ella passed away. For over 57 years she humbly and faithfully served the Lord alongside her husband purposefully making a difference in the lives of everyone she met. She is truly a woman of whom it can be said, "**She hath done what she could**"!

Her Story/My Story:

People found in Ella a friend, a counselor, and a prayer warrior. She had a strong faith, and she always prayed believing. If she prayed for rain, she would carry an umbrella. When the cupboards were bare on Christmas Eve, she'd get the kids dressed and tell them that the Lord would not fail to provide for them and, sure enough, parcels would arrive on the door step filled with food and treats. Mondays were washdays and soup day. Different ones would drop their laundry off and get a bite to eat and pick it up the following Monday. Ella would always pray as she put her scraps of leftovers in the kettle to boil. The soup and her homemade rye bread seemed to multiply like the loaves and fishes in the Bible, and regardless of how many unexpected guests turned up, there was always enough. Her husband had great faith in her faith as well. Once he found a man terribly sick with tuberculosis hiding in the barn. He had not been paid his wages from his boss and had nothing to his name. Ella's husband brought him inside and said, "I told him you could make him well." Ella quickly deduced he was dying of homesickness. If she cured that, God would cure the tuberculosis. She then boiled his clothes, fed him soup and bread, sang him songs, and told him stories. As his heart began to heal so did his health, and he eventually went back to Norway a happy man. Meeting people's physical needs was always just as important to Ella as meeting their spiritual needs. When asked how she managed taking so many different ones into her small and humble home, Ella would always respond, "Ven you have heart room you have house room." No matter what reason brought a neighbor, friend, or stranger to her doorstep, before ever trying to tackle their need or give counsel or advice, Ella would say, "First, we have coffee." It became her signature statement. Ella felt a good cup of coffee was always the beginning of a solution. It was a symbol of hospitality, comfort, and stability. She was a practical counselor and doled out her wisdom and uncommon common sense as they sipped away.

Tea, not coffee, was the choice of drink in New Zealand. When I first went there, I couldn't get over how friendly everyone was. No one ever seemed to meet a stranger, and everywhere I went everyone was always asking me if I wanted a "cuppa" or a cup of tea. It didn't take long for me to realize a "cuppa" was the Kiwi's solution to everything. If you were tired and weary, "Come, let's have a cuppa." If you were sad, "Come, let's have a cuppa." If you were perplexed and couldn't find a solution to a problem, "Come, let's have a cuppa." To the Kiwi, a "cuppa" could solve any problem and was the catalyst that put the world back in right motion. "Cuppas" were not only for distressing times, but also if you were happy, if you had good news to share, if you were meeting a new neighbor, or if you were just discussing business. I had never seen people drink so much tea in all my life. Although I embraced this cultural tradition and even enjoyed it if ginger biscuits (cookies) were offered as well, I often had to hide my frustration when I just wanted to get down to business and take care of the situation instead of taking time to have a cup of tea. One day as I was driving, I turned right on a busy street which means I had to cross traffic to turn since we drive on the left side in New Zealand. A young teen boy missed his red light and smashed right into my car in the middle of the intersection leaving it in a crescent shape. Traffic stopped and people started getting out of their cars and coming out of the shops and businesses nearby. I wasn't hurt and got out of my car to assess the damage. My car was a total write off. I was so upset and angry at this kid. The first person to reach me was a lady from a business on the corner of the intersection. She came straight up to me and put her arm around me and said, "Come, let's have a cuppa." I'm afraid my response to her about how no cup of tea was going to fix this situation was not said in a very Kiwi-like or Christ-like manner for that matter. I eventually came to appreciate this practice and have used it many times now to help diffuse a situation, to make someone comfortable enough to reveal their need, or to simply get to know someone.

Bible Study: Let's Have a Cuppa

In these modern days of busyness, more and more people, including Christians, cherish their privacy and their time. Although they have no issue with inviting people into their home via social media to let the world know what they ate that day, what they did, and to ask their 1,000 friends on Facebook their opinion on whether they should paint

their living room walls blue grey or grey blue, they are rarely willing to open up their home to someone in need, and they never seem to have time to visit their neighbor next door, stop and help a stranger, or give a word of encouragement,

The Bible is filled with commands for us to make the effort to meet people at the point of their need and not ignore it, whether it is someone we know or a stranger. Here are just a few:

- Deuteronomy 15:11 - "For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land."
- Galatians 6:2 - "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."
- James 1:27a - "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction . . ."
- Hebrews 13:16 - "But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased."
- John 15:13 - "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life [his life . . . his time . . . his resources] for his friends."
- Philippians 2:4 - "Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others."
- Romans 12:13 - "Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality."
- Luke 3:11 - "He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise."

As always, Jesus is our perfect example in this. Often in the New Testament we see Jesus, whether they came to him or He went to them, meeting someone's physical needs before He met their spiritual needs. To be sure there are many times when Jesus entered a place and proclaimed the need to repent, but more often than not, He first focused on how He could help them physically. We have the example of Zacchaeus who had been ostracized by the people and needed a friend. There is the adulterous woman who needed protection from her accusers. Peter, James, and John needed fish in order to support their family. The disciples needed rescuing during the storm. The woman in the crowd with an issue of blood needed help with her health. Mary and Martha needed the tears and comfort of their friend when their brother died. Jesus did not shy away from people whether they were old or young, wealthy or impoverished, lowly servants or religious leaders. Over and over again in the Scriptures it shows us that Jesus was involved in His community and the lives of his friends, neighbors, and strangers.

Jesus wants us to follow in His example. He not only wants us to share the truth of eternal salvation, but He wants us to stand in His place and meet the needs of others. Sure, He could just do it Himself, but instead He chooses to use us, His servants, to do it. How amazing is that! Nowhere else is this plan of His more evident than in the story of the feeding of the 5,000 found in John 6. On that day 5,000 men plus women and children were gathered listening to Him preach. The evening came, and it was time for dinner. Every person there had a physical need. They were hungry. The disciples saw the need, but their solution was to send them away. I'm sure they were tired themselves, and it was just easier to turn a blind eye to the need rather than try to figure out what could be done about it. They failed to see the situation as an opportunity for the Lord to use them to do something great for someone else. This was not Jesus' solution to the need, though. His solution was to tell His disciples, "Give ye them to eat." I would imagine, faced with the need and the directive to feed this multitude, we would most likely respond with a "How in the world?" Wouldn't it have been great if Philip responded immediately, "Sure, Lord, we've seen you turn water into wine, heal the centurion's son, heal the lame man who hasn't walked for 38 years and dozens of other miracles.

I'm sure we can do this with your help." Instead Philip started calculating the cost and assessing what they had, and he responded, "Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient for them that every one of them may take a little." It appears Andrew at least tried to find a solution when he said, "There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves, and two small fishes," but he showed his doubt when he said, "but what are they among so many." The disciples had forgotten to factor in Jesus' miracle-working power and deduced that what they had was not enough and that there was no way they could meet the need. Why didn't Jesus just rain manna down? Why didn't He just take care of the problem Himself? Why ask His disciples to take care of it when He knew their limitations? I don't believe Jesus ever expected them to feed the people by themselves. I believe He merely wanted to see if they were willing to give what they were able to give and allow Him to bless it and multiply it and make it sufficient. This was the pattern He needed them to learn for the time when He would no longer be with them - a pattern that they could use to meet the people's needs if they just gave what they could and let God take it, bless it, and make it sufficient.

Sometimes we steer clear of others' needs and problems because we can't be bothered, but most often it is because we feel we are inadequate or not sufficient to meet the need. God doesn't need us to be sufficient for someone else, but He does need us to be willing to do what we can. We have two choices every time we are faced with a need just like the disciples did that day . . . we can make calculations of our own ability and resources and succumb to doubt, or we can take what we have and let God bless it, multiply it, and make it sufficient.

If you are willing, Christ will meet the needs of others through your yielding of your insufficiencies and inadequacies. God wants to use you to meet others' needs. I love the little boy in this story. He is the real hero to me. He gave up his lunch not knowing if he would go hungry that day because of it, and instead everyone had sufficient food with leftovers including himself. When we yield our little, we not only meet the needs of others and bless them, but we ourselves are blessed beyond measure.

The Bible has many verses about the blessings that come with meeting others' needs. Here are a few:

- Proverbs 19:17 - "He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the LORD; and that which he hath given will he pay him again."
- Proverbs 22:9 - "He that hath a bountiful eye shall be blessed; for he giveth of his bread to the poor."
- Luke 6:38 - "Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again."

The world is full of people who are suffering. We need more women who are willing to replicate the kind of womanhood that Ella displayed. We need more women who will follow her example of being someone with a deeply loving and approachable spirit who has the great desire to be the hands and feet of Jesus to meet the needs of others.

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Resources:

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