

Feeding the Hungry

John 6:1-21

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A minister was making a home visit to one of the younger families in his parish. A five-year-old boy answered the front door and told the minister his mother would be there shortly. To make some conversation, the minister asked the little guy what he would like to be when he grows up.

The boy immediately answered, "I'd like to be possible."

"What do you mean by that?" asked the puzzled minister.

"Well, you see," the boy replied, "just about every day my mom tells me I'm being impossible!"

"Impossible" is one of those words that defines what we decide to do. Too often we hear the word "impossible," and most people will immediately decide that it's something that can't be done.

"Impossible" is a word that comes to mind when we put ourselves in the place of the Philip and Andrew in this morning's gospel lesson. Jesus and the disciples were being hounded by a teeming mass of people. Thousands have followed Jesus around the lake, hoping to hear him, hoping to see him, hoping to touch him and receive from him some of the powerful healing they had heard about. At one point Jesus saw the size of the crowd, and he turned to Philip and said, "Where will we buy bread to feed these people?"¹

In that question, Jesus implies two things. The first is that the people have a need--they are hungry, and they need food. But it is the second implication that alarms Philip the most, because the second implication in Jesus' question is that it is the responsibility of Jesus and the disciples to feed the people--it is their responsibility to meet the need of the people. Jesus asked, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?"

Of all the things that went through Philip's minds, I would think one of them would be the word, "impossible." Philip's response was more a protest than an answer to Jesus' question: "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little."²

Impossible.

Andrew's response wasn't much more hopeful. Bringing a little boy to Jesus, Andrew presents the boy's meager sack lunch: "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?"³ Five loaves and two fish won't go very far in feeding 5,000 people.

Again, impossible.

Jesus asked his disciples, "Where will we buy bread for these people?" In a strict sense, we have a story here about feeding the hungry; but actually it goes much deeper than that. In reality it is a story, not just about feeding the hungry, but about perceiving and meeting the needs of people. It is a story about our responsibility as Jesus' disciples to view the world as Jesus does--with compassion that sees the needs around us, and with a

¹ John 6:5

² John 6:7

³ John 6:9

sense of responsibility to meet those needs. "Feeding the hungry" becomes a paradigm for engaging in the work of Jesus wherever we see the need.

For us, feeding the hungry may be just that--feeding the hungry. But feeding the hungry also may translate into reaching out to those displaced by disaster, or ministering to the growing population of the unemployed, or tending to the needs of the poor, or providing care for the widows and the orphans.

Feeding the hungry means meeting the needs we encounter. And the needs are great, aren't they? You watch a movie like "Slumdog Millionaire" and you come away sick to your stomach when you see the kinds of living conditions that are "normal" for millions of people in the world. Even in our own community, just a few blocks away there is poverty that most of us drive by without really noticing. Or you can't help but notice the "For Sale" signs that line our streets, with no movement on them in months, or the silence of the steel mill--all signs of economic crisis in our society. The needs are great. The needs are beyond our ability to keep up with them.

The problem is, the Christian church often sees the magnitude of the need, and like Philip and Andrew, we are tempted to protest that we don't have nearly enough resources to address the need--impossible! But "impossible" is not an acceptable word. I would like to suggest three things from this story that will help us overcome our temptation to despair at the impossibility of the needs we encounter.

The first way to overcome our despair at the impossibility of the task ahead of us is to use what we have available, even if it's not enough to solve the problem. That's how the 5,000 people got fed--they were fed because a young boy had five loaves and two fish, and he gave what he had to Jesus. The boy gave what he had. It didn't matter that all logic would conclude that it wasn't nearly enough to feed the crowd; the boy simply gave what he had.

And in that there is an example for us. You see, it's not up to us to worry about whether or not we have enough resources to do it all, but it is up to us to do what we can. Don't let the fear that we won't be able to do it all keep us from doing anything at all.

I know you've heard the story of the boy and the starfish. One day a man was walking along the beach when he noticed a boy picking something up and gently throwing it into the ocean. Approaching the boy, he asked, "What are you doing?"

The youth replied, "Throwing starfish back into the ocean. The surf is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them back, they'll die."

"Son," the man said, "don't you realize there are miles and miles of beach and hundreds of starfish? You can't make a difference!"

At that point the boy bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it back into the surf. Then, smiling at the man, he said, "I made a difference for that one."

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The second way to overcome our despair is to leave the increase to the Lord. In the end, it wasn't the boy, or Philip or Andrew, who fed the crowd of 5,000 people. It was Jesus. *Jesus* took what was given to him, and *Jesus* was able to do miraculous things with it. The miracle isn't in the five loaves and two fish; the miracle is in what Jesus was able to do with so little.

In the hands of Jesus, our meager resources multiply beyond anything we can ask or imagine. I have seen this principle at work so many times in the life of the church that I have lost count. One example that comes to mind is our Change 4 Children offering. Most of us don't give a second thought about the change in our pocket at the end of the day. But when we take those few coins and put them in the basket, and when we send the money on to Zambia, a great multiplication takes place. Coins that wouldn't even add up to a coke from our

vending machine will pay for a hot lunch for some young boy or girl for an entire week. That's the kind of increase that is possible when we leave the increase to the Lord.

Trust the Lord for the increase.

The third thing we can do in the face of seemingly impossible needs is, after we have done what we can, and after we have left the increase to Jesus, we must leave nothing to waste. After Jesus fed the 5,000 people, creating an abundance out of so little, there were twelve baskets of leftovers. Jesus commanded his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost."⁴

Let nothing be lost. There is a wisdom of responsible stewardship that we must never forget: The blessings we receive are not to be wasted. The gifts we are given are not to be left unused. Leave nothing to waste.

In our Summer Sunday School class we have spent the last two months talking about how to care for the world that God has created. The biblical mandate that each of us has is to be responsible stewards of the resources we are given, and that includes the natural resources we use. But you and I both know that we don't do a very good job at that. The waste we create in this world and the resources that we toss aside in neglect are enormous; we rightly deserve condemnation for our poor stewardship. I hope we as individuals and a church can do a better job at reducing our wastefulness. Because in truth, when we waste less, that leaves more at our disposal to use in addressing the needs Jesus calls us to address. "Where are we to buy bread for the people to eat?" Maybe some of it will come when we have more because we waste less.

Two quick stories about real people who encountered needs that were well beyond their ability resolve; but they didn't let the impossibility of the need keep them from being effective nonetheless.

The first was a tiny little Indian woman whom we know as Mother Teresa. One day she told her superiors that she had three pennies and a dream from God to build an orphanage in Calcutta. Her superiors tried to discourage her. They told her that she couldn't do anything with three pennies, much less build an orphanage. She just smiled and told them that with God and three pennies she could do anything.⁵

It's a good thing she didn't listen to her superiors.

The second person is a physician who made a trip to Haiti at the invitation of a Haitian doctor. The physician is an orthopedic surgeon, and he specializes in pediatric deformities and trauma. Haiti is the most impoverished country in the Western Hemisphere, and the squalor is beyond anything we can imagine. There is virtually no health care, so what can one surgeon do to make a dent in the quality of life for Haitian children? But he wouldn't be deterred. Over the past fifteen years, he's made at least thirty trips to Haiti. Not only does he perform surgeries on the children, but even more importantly, he has taught Haitian surgeons vital skills so they can continue to perform the surgeries when he's not there, and he's also taken other American doctors with him on his many trips. One man has given what he has available to him, and the end result is far greater than the effort of just one man.

The surgeon of whom I speak is my father. I am sinfully proud of the fact that he refused to see the situation in Haiti as impossible.

Henry Ford very cleverly said, "Whether you think you can or not, you are right."

The Christian church would do well to remember that when we're faced with something that appears impossible.

⁴ John 6:12

⁵ Curtis W. Freeman, in *Lectionary Homiletics*, July, 2000, p. 36.

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