

A Growing Sense of Responsibility

November 6, 2011

Luke 9: 10-17

Last week, we watched as Jesus sent his disciples out to proclaim the good news and care for those whom no one cared about. Their time of listening to Jesus preach and watching him care for people was over. Now, it was their turn. He sends them out with only the robes they are wearing and the sandals on their feet, with only their faith for the journey. This week, although we have switched Gospels from Matthew to Luke, we hear about the disciples' return. They tell Jesus all about what has happened on their journeys. Jesus invites them to come away with him to a quiet place, Bethsaida, presumably to hear even more.

It turned out that quiet retreat together was not what was "in the cards." Instead, word passes across the countryside: "Jesus is coming!" Perhaps this is another turning point in the Gospel: though the disciples had gone out looking for folks to preach to, now the crowds are coming to Jesus and to them. It doesn't take the crowd long to find them. I imagine that when the disciples saw the size of the crowd--five thousand men, the text says because in that world only men counted--they must have let out a collective gasp. What an ocean of needs! When Jesus sees them he simply does what he had told the disciples to do all along: he proclaims the good news and cares for those in need.

Apparently, this went on for some time. In fact, it seems to have been a whole day's worth of preaching and teaching and healing. The disciples had to have been amazed at all that they had seen. In fact, all indications are that up to this point all the disciples had done was stand around and watch. Now that they were back from their missions, in the face of the crowd, they were slipping back into being spectators again. Imagine how comfortable it must have been to just watch Jesus work, to listen to him preach, to stand by as he went about the business of touching lepers and

people with every other illness imaginable: “You go, Jesus! You’re the best!”

Now in the midst of every effort to do something helpful, there are usually folks in that spectator position. In my frustrated moments, I refer to them as “the ideas committee.” Though I’m no businessman, the folks I know who are tell me these people are called “consultants” there. On our work trips, there is usually a moment or two when someone stumbles onto a work site, and offers a bit of unsolicited advice: “You know, if you really want to do that better...” They haven’t been sweating all day, figuring the problem out. They are not aware of all the details that had to be taken into account to form a plan. They just have some thoughts to share. Then they hop back into their air conditioned vans and are on their way. Then, the sweaty work crew gets back to the work of trying to make something better.

The disciples, as “the ideas committee,” as Jesus’ “personal consultants,” having stood and watched all day, offer up their big insight of the day: “You know, these people must be hungry. We really ought to let them go now so that they can go hit up the villages and towns around here for some food and a place to stay. After all, we’re in the middle of nowhere here! We really ought to let these people go now so that their needs can be someone else’s problem!” That’s their plan.

Can you imagine how Jesus’ heart sank in that moment? “Really, after having just been out caring for people and having those people care for your needs in return, after standing around all day and watching me care for these people, that’s the best plan you can come up with? Your big idea is to let somebody else deal with their needs?” He had to stand there and shake his head and think to himself, “Wow, they really don’t get it do they?” Though he may have thought all those things, he says something stunningly succinct and simple: “You do something; you give them something to eat.

Congratulations! You have correctly identified the needs of the people in front of you. Now, what are you going to do?”

Now, we can give the disciples some credit for recognizing the needs of others. There are plenty of people who walk through a whole lifetime without ever noticing anyone else’s needs. However, just noticing the needs will only qualify you to be a member of the “ideas committee.” Noticing the needs around you will equip you to walk through life saying things like, “Wow...the government really ought to do something...” or “The church really ought to do something...” or just a plain old generic, “Somebody ought to do something about these horrendous needs.” You can have insight into the needs of those around you but until you take responsibility for doing something in response to those needs, you are not following Christ.

Jesus looks the disciples in the eye and says, “You do something!” He challenges them to take personal responsibility for responding to the needs of those right in front of them. Don’t pass that responsibility off. Do what you can do. What’s their response? “We don’t have enough! We don’t have enough food. We only have five loaves and two fish. We don’t have enough money.” Then, they stand there with the pockets of their robes turned inside out. There is no way that they can say with confidence that they can get the job done. There is no way that they can trust in their own resources and predict success.

Now, given that Jesus has just spent the day curing the sick and that he has already done any number of other amazing things that no one was able to explain, it’s not a stretch to think that maybe, just maybe, Jesus might have been able to feed the crowd all on his own. In fact, if you have ever been a parent or a teacher or boss at work or a coach, you have probably stood in a similar moment. You know that the person you are working with--your child, your student, your worker, your player--has to struggle through and learn what is challenging them. Yet, it is so tempting to

just step in, to just fix the problem, to just do whatever it takes to make the frustration go away. However, you know that if you do, the opportunity will have been missed and the lesson will not have been learned.

This week, I remembered a story from someone I loved about his experience as a young child. Someone gave him a caterpillar who spun his way into a cocoon. Every day, he watched that cocoon, watching and waiting for the promised butterfly to appear. Day after day passed. Then, one day, he noticed a crack in the chrysalis. He saw an antenna poke its way out. Little tiny legs struggled to pry the cocoon open. Slowly, what grew inside the boy was great frustration and empathy: “This must be hard for the butterfly. I should help it! I could just end this whole struggle now.” So, he went and found a pair of scissors and cut the butterfly loose. It turned out though that the butterfly needed to struggle to build its strength, to be ready to emerge. The butterfly never thrived.

The disciples in this moment are on the brink of emerging and evolving and becoming the disciples Jesus needs them to be. Yet, they have to get through that struggle. They have to become participants, not mere spectators. They have to learn not just to love Christ but to become like Christ. They have to learn how to be God’s servants. In this moment, they have to learn to share what they have to share in response to the needs of others, even if that sharing doesn’t seem like it’s enough, even if it doesn’t seem like there is a chance in the world that their help will be all that helpful. They have to not only proclaim the good news that God is in their midst they have to live that good news by trusting that if they do their part then God will do God’s part, as well.

Jesus challenged the disciples to take responsibility for the needs of those in front of them. Don’t hand those people off to someone else. Don’t sit around and wish that someone would do something. Just do something. Don’t tell me what you wish you could do. Do what you can. And if anyone thinks that Jesus isn’t

challenging us in exactly the same way today...well, then we most certainly are missing the point.

When the disciples are willing to put their own two fish and five loaves into the mix, when it's possible that they may have to have less in order for someone else to have anything at all, Jesus offers the disciples a tip: break the problem down. Take all those people and put them in small groups. When you take a problem and break it down, you have somewhere to begin. When you take a group of people and put them in small groups, people can make eye contact with each other. Crowds turn into mobs. Mobs hoard whatever is in short supply. A small group feels connected. A small group will share.

Even when we're willing to put our loaves and fish on the line, we can still be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem. That's when we have to remember to break the problem down. We have to work one person at a time. We have to work one challenge at a time. We have to figure out what today's tasks are and feel good when we get those things done. We have to remember that not a thing is going to change unless we try.

Finally, Jesus takes this moment and makes it sacramental, that is, full of the presence of God. He takes the bread and the fish, blesses them and breaks them and looks up to heaven. Then, he gives them back to the disciples to distribute to the crowd. He stands in the middle of helping people and offers what they have to give to God. They are doing what they are doing not to prove something about themselves--how good they are or how generous they are or how noble they are. They are doing what they are doing because this is what God wants, because this is what it means to be a part of God's kingdom, because this is how God intends for the world to work: people sharing; people caring; people helping each other.

Some people think the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand had to do with what Jesus did--he fed well over five

thousand people with a couple of fish and a little bread and there were twelve baskets of leftovers afterwards. Some people think the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand was that the disciples trusted God enough to share everything they had. Some people think the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand was that a crowd of hungry people faced with meager supplies managed not to turn on one another but to share and they all had enough. Maybe, in the end, it is all of those things. Maybe, in the end it remains a sheer mystery.

I'm pretty sure that the ongoing miracle of the story, though, is the way it challenges us. From two thousand years in the past, Jesus challenges us: "Don't pretend you don't see the needs of others. What are you going to do?" Give it everything you've got. Break the problem down. Make room for the presence of God. Then, just try to tell me you aren't amazed when it turns out that there was more than enough after all!