

Satisfied ... with Plenty Left Over • Luke 9:10-17

It was exam week when I was a graduate student in Denver. The time was late. I had studied for hours until it felt like my brain would melt down with any more information. I was too wound up to go to sleep so I asked Charleen if she was willing to go out for a late night pizza. We went to Shakey's Pizza Parlor and I ordered a giant pizza with Italian sausage. A giant pizza is supposed to feed four to six people. I talked to her about some of the things I had been studying and needed to know the next day. We talked and ate and talked and ate until the entire pizza was gone. It occurred to me that she might not have had her fair share so I asked how many slices she did eat. She said "none". I had eaten the whole thing! It sort of made me sick, but it was really good! When you're hungry it's amazing how much you can consume.

Imagine ordering pizzas for 5000 people! That would be a huge order. Feeding 5000 hungry men is no small task. Yet that's the story of the miracle in Luke 9. The story is interesting for us to read but it must be a very important story as well because it is the only miracle Jesus performed that is reported in all four of his New Testament biographies.

I have long been intrigued by a line in John 21:25 where he wrote, "*Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.*" John had no shortage of material to draw from and yet he chose to retell the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 even though he knew it had already been reported by Jesus' other biographers. It must really be important!

It all started on the day Jesus' twelve closest followers returned from a major outing. They had spread out to different villages around the lake of Galilee to teach and to heal. When they came back together Jesus took them on a debriefing retreat near the lakeside village of Bethsaida. He wanted to hear everything that had happened. It was their special

time to be alone and renewed with Jesus.

Someone leaked information. Word about Jesus' whereabouts spread to crowds of people. They were attracted to Jesus like metal to a magnet. Without much planning or thinking thousands of men left their jobs and homes and started walking around Galilee Lake looking for Jesus. Probably because of the quickness of the decision and the distance of travel there were fewer women and children that accompanied them so it turned out to be a huge crowd of 5000 men that came to where Jesus was.

What would you expect Jesus' response to be? He was a celebrity. He was popular. Everyone wanted to be cured by him. Everyone wanted to be taught by him. Everyone wanted to say that they were part of his circle. But he wanted to be alone with his friends. He had every right to take time away. He had plans for time together with his disciples. These people had come without invitation or permission.

Many celebrities would be upset. They would tell

the crowds to leave and go somewhere else. Enough is enough. But not Jesus! "*He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing.*" With Jesus, seeking people are always welcome. He delights to teach. He delights to heal people. He delights to meet human needs. With Jesus there is no limit.

Sometimes I hear people complain about churches becoming too large. Some Christians prefer a more intimate and manageable group and are actually irritated by crowds of hundreds and thousands. They say, "Enough is enough. Let them go someplace else!" But, not Jesus! Jesus always welcomes those who come to him. He has no limit. He never says there are enough, not even when there are thousands who come.

I am so grateful that Jesus doesn't have a cut-off number. What if the cut-off came just before me and I was excluded? What if Jesus set the limit to exclude my wife or children, extended family or best friends? Not to worry! Jesus always welcomes

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more!

Late that afternoon Jesus' twelve disciples approached him as a group with a demand saying, "*Send the crowd away so they can go to the surrounding villages and countryside and find food and lodging, because we are in a remote place here.*"

That was a very practical suggestion. The people needed food to eat. The people needed a place to sleep. There were 5000 of them. They were out in the countryside. There wasn't even a town. And even if they could do something to serve all these people it would cost a small fortune. Frankly, reasonable people would agree that they were giving Jesus good advice.

It was a practical suggestion. But it lacked compassion and was totally selfish. These twelve weren't thinking about the needs of the 5000. To them they were nameless faces in a very large crowd. To them the 5000 were more of a problem than they were people. The twelve wanted Jesus to themselves. They wanted to hear what Jesus had to say. They wanted their bodies healed and their stomachs fed. The truth is they just didn't much care about others.

When asked to send the people away Jesus had a direct challenge for his disciples. It borders on shocking it was so direct. Jesus said, "*You give them something to eat.*" Jesus not only rejected their selfish greed, he made them responsible for the solution to the problem.

To tell you the truth, what Jesus said makes me squirm. When faced with people's needs my first response is likely to be let someone else do it; it's beyond me. And my second response is let God do it; after all, God has huge resources. But Jesus says, "You . . . do something!"

Now don't misunderstand him. Jesus wasn't passing the buck. He could have done it himself. Rather, Jesus wants us to know the wonderful privilege and satisfaction of doing good for others. He refuses to let us miss out on the grand opportunity of service.

One of the things I just love about Wooddale Church is the way so many people respond to the invitation of Jesus. You are quick to say "Yes!" to whatever Jesus calls you to do. You are very generous to serve, to love, to give. You don't close the door behind you and want to be the last one in on what Jesus is doing. You accept the challenge of Jesus to meet the needs of others . . . and that is

wonderful.

But that day Jesus' followers weren't that quick to be generous. Instead they made excuses. They said, "*We have only five loaves of bread and two fish—unless we go and buy food for all this crowd.*" They were trying to make a point. It was obvious they couldn't go to a nearby town and buy enough food to feed 5000 plus people. I doubt we could do that today. Can you imagine calling up Dominoes or Papa John's and ordering 1500 pizzas to be delivered in one hour? It just couldn't be done. So, by offering an impossible excuse they thought they were getting off the hook of responsibility.

It's interesting that they did acknowledge the limited resources they had. It wasn't much. And it was borrowed. In the crowd they had found a young boy who, unlike all the others, had planned ahead—or at least his mother had planned ahead—and had brought his lunch. He carried a sack lunch with five barley loaves and two fish. Barley was the food of the poor. The fish were probably dried perch from Galilee Lake. Not much.

There are a thousand parallels here for us. We, too, are prone to make excuses. We are quick to see what can't be done. But everything changes when someone steps up with a little and offers it for Jesus to use.

Frankly, sometimes we offer nothing because what we have doesn't seem like much. We think, "I have so little, what difference would it make? What's the point of volunteering?" Or, "I have so little money to give that I might just as well keep it." It's a good thing the boy with the little lunch didn't have that attitude. He gave what little he had to Jesus and saw spectacular results. Jesus did what Jesus does. When confronted with limitations, he multiplies. Jesus is the ultimate master at making much out of little, of turning impending disaster into a miracle.

First, Jesus ordered some organization. "*Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each.*" I've tried to find a logistical reason for this and I don't think there is a good one. They could have been served without being subdivided into one hundred separate groups, so perhaps Jesus had a different purpose. Perhaps he recognized that in a crowd of five thousand they could maintain their anonymity and receive the miracle that Jesus would do without discussing it with anyone else around them. They could remain isolated. But if he put them in

clusters of fifty they would experience the miracle in a different way. They would grow spiritually as they interacted together about what Jesus had done.

It is a principle that works for us, as well, in the life of the church. Those who are part of the crowd are certainly welcome, but there's a difference in being part of a large crowd and becoming part of a smaller community. Those who belong to a community within the crowd are better connected, more responsible, have greater accountability and grow better spiritually. That is one of the reasons why Wooddale Church offers so many opportunities to connect in Sunday School classes, adult communities, ministry teams, choirs, social service projects, sports teams and everything else. We relive the experience with Jesus reported in Luke 9 . . . the best of the crowd and the best of the smaller communities.

Once they were divided into groups of fifty, Jesus prayed. Holding those minimal resources in his hands, Jesus gave thanks. Gratitude is not just about the past; it is also about the future. Gratitude can be an expression of faith. When Jesus prayed with gratitude concerning the feeding of the 5000 they had not yet been fed. It was a prayer of faith.

Two hundred years ago George Mueller was born in Bristol, England. He was a man of exceptional faith, extraordinary prayer and great social compassion. He founded orphanages and over the years cared for hundreds of children who didn't have homes and parents. And he did it with meager resources. There were times when he would gather the children into the orphanage dining hall and lead them in a prayer of thanksgiving for the food they were about to eat when there was no food on the table or in the kitchen. And time after time God provided the food by the end of the prayer. Once it was a milk truck that broke down. The driver knocked on the door during the prayer and offered the contents of the truck because otherwise it would spoil. Other times anonymous donors generously sent food without even knowing the need and it would always arrive at just exactly the right time.

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I Thessalonians 5:16-18 tells Christians, "*Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*" In other words, Christians are to be like Jesus, giving thanks even when there isn't much to be thankful for.

When Jesus finished praying he broke the bread and fish into smaller pieces and asked his disciples to start distributing them to the crowd. It was another faith stretcher for the disciples. They must have thought, "Here he goes again!" This was either one of the wackiest things Jesus had proposed or another demonstration of the grand power and presence of God.

Sometimes Jesus puts us into similar situations. Humanly they seem destined to failure. "This just does not make sense." "It seems all wrong." "It just doesn't feel right." "This is a sure loser." Then silently, secretly, Jesus does his miracle. He changes nothing into something. He turns failure into success. He makes a little into a lot.

Where I personally experience this work of Jesus most often is in my own responsibilities in preaching. I have many weekends when I have prepared a sermon I know is inadequate and I plead with God to somehow make it effective. I stand to speak and my words don't flow, my grammar is incorrect, my voice is distracting and I drive home telling Charleen I don't ever want to come back again. I am so keenly aware of my weakness and inadequacy.

Then I receive a note during the week or get phone calls or have people talk to me and say things that blow me away. They say, "God directly spoke to me through you last Sunday." Or, "I listened to you and my life was changed." "I went home following that sermon and got down on my knees and prayed to accept Jesus Christ as my Savior."

I wonder if they have me confused with someone else. I think they must be mistaken. I want to ask if they are sure they were at Wooddale Church. And then I realize that Jesus has done it again. He has taken the verbal equivalent of two dried fish and five little barley crusts and miraculously made them into something magnificent. It is amazing how

much Jesus can do when he has very little to work with!

The story of Jesus' miracle ends with the words: "*They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.*" I just love it! They were satisfied! They were satisfied because of Jesus. Not because they had a gourmet meal. Frankly the food they had was a very basic menu. Jesus met their needs, not their wants. But they were satisfied. They were satisfied and there was excess. Jesus is not only concerned and compassionate, but he is very generous.

This is Thanksgiving weekend. We live in America. We are well fed to the point of excess. The garbage we throw away would be considered a gourmet meal by millions of people in our world today. We live in abundance.

But don't feel guilty. We should feel grateful. Be grateful to Jesus for all we have! And be responsive to Jesus and to the needs of others. Be just like Jesus . . . welcoming, blessing, feeding and helping others.

Our Father,

May the old story, four times told in the New Testament, be a modern and vibrant story for us today. Take the words of Jesus' biography and turn them into our biography. May we give in great gratitude and may Jesus multiply in great power. May you receive great glory and may you have great satisfaction.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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