

Sitting on the Grass with Jesus

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Rev. Peter Jonker

Luke 4:14-30

'You give them something to eat.' says Jesus. Those are hard words. Those words would have really stung the disciples. Remember the broader context here. Remember what the disciples have just been through. They had just finished a long mission trip. Their first one. In verse 8 Jesus had sent them out, essentially empty handed on a teaching mission. They'd travelled all over Galilee teaching and healing and casting out demons. The work had been exhausting. Spending every day facing the most desperate kind of human misery, dealing with needy people, never knowing where they would sleep that night or where their next meal would come from. But they had done it. Now the mission was done. They were back. They give Jesus a full report on their work, but they also tell Jesus how tired they are: "Jesus we are bushed! There's been so much coming and going we haven't even had time to eat! We are starving." And Jesus seems to understand: "Good work guys. Now, come away with me to a quiet out-of-the-way place on the other side of the lake and we'll get some rest." An out of the way place sounded perfect to the disciples. Because not only were they exhausted; things were getting dangerous. While they were out on this mission, Herod, the cruel old King had killed John the Baptist. Jesus and his disciples had always experienced opposition in their work, but execution! This was opposition at a whole new level. So when they get into the boat and start for the wilderness place, they are exhausted and afraid and they are so ready for this vacation. They are thinking: Camping trip! Personal retreat! A week of leisurely days, lounging at the seashore, hanging with Jesus, getting refreshed.

But no sooner do they get to this quiet place, this wilderness place, they find that it is not so quiet after all. It's not deserted. There are 5000 people there. 5000 needy people. 5000 people who are so needy that they have literally sprinted from the towns and villages to get to this place. Before the boat even hits the shore the disciples can hear them calling out 'Jesus, Jesus, please I have something I need to talk to you about! Jesus my child is blind! Jesus my husband is confused! Jesus I need you PLEASE HELP!!!' Now, how do you think that made the disciples feel? About how you would feel if you were booked a camping site at Hoffmaster State Park with your family, hoping to get away, only to find that your two most needy clients were camping in the sites next to you. I imagine the sight of these 5000 was a kick in the gut to these exhausted men.

But not to Jesus. The disciples look up at Jesus and he can see that he has compassion on them. Because they are harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus starts teaching them many things, as our text says, and for a while the disciples don't say anything. But as the day wears on they're getting hungrier and more irritable – pretty typical for hungry men. Finally their patience cracks and they say, "Ummm, Jesus, Don't you think we should get rid of these people. We're out in the middle of nowhere. There's no food. Maybe we should send them home so they can take care of themselves". *'You give them something to eat'*, says Jesus. And then they snap. "You want US to give them something to eat!! You want us to up and cater a dinner for 5000 people? Do you know how much that would cost? 6 dollars a head times 5000...that's 30,000 dollars! We don't have that kind of money! We were never rich people and following you hasn't increased our income stream!"

Do you feel a little sympathy for these poor disciples? They are feeling overwhelmed. They have nothing left in the tank. They speak for anybody who knows the feeling of working and working and working, giving, giving and giving, and then after all that work, and all that effort, finding that your list of responsibilities is longer than when you started. Do you know this feeling? I think you do.

When you're in this place of exhaustion, it kills your compassion. In one of his books, I think it's the "Tipping Point", Malcom Gladwell reports on a study done with some seminarians. The seminarians were broken up into two groups. Both groups were asked to travel from one place on their seminary campus to another. One group was told that they had a class in five minutes. They were sent across campus with an appointment to keep, with work to do. The other group was sent in a more leisurely way, without an appointment. The study was set up so that both groups would encounter panhandlers along the route, people who would beg them for money. The seminarians who had a more leisurely schedule were much more likely to stop and hear the needs of the person begging for help. The people who had a class, the people who felt the press of responsibility and the pinch of scarcity, were much more likely to hurry on past.

I could have told Malcom Gladwell the same thing. Here's a scene I've lived: I'm walking out into the parking lot after a fourteen hour day and I'm feeling behind on my sermon. I know tomorrow will be another 14 hour day and I haven't eaten dinner yet. Now here comes a panhandler. He's got a story for me. He needs 30 dollars because his sick daughter needs medicine or because he needs a bus ticket to Detroit for a job interview tomorrow. I'm hungry and tired and guess how much compassion I have? I am so good at turning those people away. When we are afraid, when we are tired, we build walls, we don't want to hear about people's needs, we hold tightly to our loaves and fishes, and send everyone back to their own towns to fend for themselves. When we are tired and afraid, we pull our resources in and it's every man for himself. It's a kind of Spiritual shriveling. But Jesus says to his disciples, says to me, and says to you too, 'No. I know you are tired. But you give them something to eat.' He refuses to let us collapse into selfishness.

When he does this miracle Jesus is not just feeding 5000 hungry people, he's teaching the disciples and us about how to react in our times of fear and scarcity. He does that by referencing two Old Testament passages in this miracle. Did you catch the Old Testament references? The first passage is Exodus 18. Did you notice that detail about how Jesus had the sit down on the grass in groups of hundreds and fifties. That's a strange detail. Why did he do that? That's a reference to Exodus 18 and the story of Moses and his Father in law Jethro. That's another burnout story. Moses is feeling burned out from all his leadership responsibilities. He's been leading the Israelites through the desert, judging their disputes, listening to their grumbling, and he's cooked. Jethro sees the burnout and says to his son-in-law, "Moses, this isn't good! You need to spread the workload!" Here's the quote from verses 21-23 of that passage: "*Select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens.* ²² *Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you.* ²³ *If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied.*" Do you hear the connection?

What is Jesus doing when he echoes this passage? I think he's reminding us that ministry needs to be done together and in an organized way. When we face the task alone, it feels overwhelming, but when we do it together, and when we do it in an organized way when

everyone brings what they have, our gifts are multiplied. When we work together, it's not my gift plus your gift plus your gift; it's my gift times your gift times your gift. If I meet a need by myself I bless the person in front of me. But if I go with you to meet a need, I bless the person in front of me and I bless you too. I am blessed by watching you, and you are blessed by watching me. We help the person with a need, but we also lift up and encourage each other. So the blessing is multiplied. When we do it together the blessing is bigger. The gift is multiplied. When we are exhausted, we tend to isolate ourselves, but that isolation will only harm us in the long run. When we go out together in the power of the Spirit and work together and share ourselves, blessing is multiplied.

The blessing is also multiplied when we bring what we have to the Good Shepherd. I said the first Old Testament passage echoed here is Exodus 18. I wonder if you caught the other Old Testament reference. It's Psalm 23. The tip off here is verse 39. Jesus had all of them sit down on the green grass. The green grass. It doesn't seem like a significant detail. But keep in mind that Mark never gives details like this. Mark's writing is spare. He never tells you the color of something unless it is something important. Why does he mention green grass now? Because he wants you to think of the green pastures of Psalm 23. Remember how Jesus reacted when he saw the crowds on the shore? He had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. And where are they when the good Shepherd does this miracle? They are beside the quiet waters of Galilee. So, in this miracle the good Shepherd makes his tired sheep to lie down in green pastures beside quiet waters. And there on the Green pastures beside the quiet waters, he prepares a feast for them. And when that feast is over, their baskets overflow. They shall not want. They are satisfied.

Why is Jesus echoing Psalm 23 in this miracle? I think Jesus is saying to the disciples, *"I see how tired you are, I see that you are harassed and helpless. I see that you are down to your last bit of fish, your last slice of bread. Don't worry, in me, it is enough."* When the disciples hold the bread in their own hands and look at the 5000 people, the math looks hopeless. But when they give the bread to Jesus and Jesus blesses the bread and breaks it and raises it up to heaven – then, because it is in the hands of the crucified Lord, the bread is enough for the disciples, for the 5000, for the world. It's not all that different than what happens here at this table when we celebrate the Lord's Supper. The little bit of bread that you hold in your hands after the distribution is not much to look at. If you found a piece of bread that size in the bottom of your bread bag, or lying on your counter, you wouldn't even save it. You'd sweep it up. You'd toss it out. It's not even enough to feed your dog! But when a pastor takes that same piece and holds it up at this table, when he says, *"Take eat remember and believe that Christ gave his body for the complete remission of all your sins,"* and you put that bread in your mouth. That same piece of bread is roughly the size of eternity. It feeds you down to the depths of your soul. All of your hopes and fears are met in that tiny piece of bread because that bread has been given to you by Jesus.

So what are you up against this week? What 5000 things do you have to do? May I suggest that whatever the size of the task, take your resources and give them to Jesus. Give them to the good shepherd. Let him take it and bless it and break it and give it back to you. And see if there isn't just enough here to get you through.

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