

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, November 18, 2018 – Missions Sunday

Hymns: Psalm 100; 772 – Christ for the world we sing; 774 - Freely, freely;

722 – Lord, whose love; 778 – Lord, you give the great commission

Scripture: Mark 8:1-9; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Sermon: Do What You Can, Where You Are, With What You Have

Mark 8:1-9 NIV

During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance.”

His disciples answered, “But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?”

“How many loaves do you have?” Jesus asked.

“Seven,” they replied.

He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people, and they did so. They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them. The people ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. About four thousand were present.

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 NIV

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: “They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever.”

Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

“Do What You Can, Where You Are, With What You Have.” I always thought this was a saying by Mother Teresa. But it is actually from Teddy Roosevelt, who is not easily confused with Mother Teresa. After all, Teddy Roosevelt also said, “Walk softly and carry a big stick.” I’m pretty sure Mother Teresa never said that. And while she maybe never did say, “Do What You Can, Where You Are, With What You Have,” either, she did something much more important. She lived it. It’s an idea she got not from the sayings of Teddy Roosevelt, but from the example someone she knew much better – Jesus of Nazareth. Let’s go through the story we just heard, and watch this saying come to life.

During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance.”

The first thing to notice is that Jesus, faced with a crowd of hungry people, has compassion for them. They haven’t eaten for days, and Jesus knows what it is like to go without food for a period of time. *“If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance.”*

The first step, then, in “Doing What We Can, Where We Are, With What We Have,” is taking notice of the needs that exist in the people around us, and having compassion for them. It is tempting to ignore the needs of others. After all, no one wants to have to confront the suffering of other people. We have problems enough of our own, without worrying about other people’s trouble. But have you ever noticed that the kind of people who are preoccupied only with their own problems, are people who seem to end up with more problems than anyone else? And the people who care for others, who are concerned for others, never seem to be anywhere near as troubled by their own situation?

I just know, as I am saying this, that you’ve got people popping into your head, people who spend so much of their energy worrying about their own situation, they can’t get past their own misery. And you know, too, people who reach out to others, who respond compassionately to others, and somehow, these compassionate folks don’t seem quite as overwhelmed by their own troubles. It turns out that in focussing on our own needs and ignoring the needs of others, our own troubles just become greater, and in fact end up controlling our lives. Ignoring the troubles and needs of others makes our own troubles worse.

Back to the story: *During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion for*

these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. How much do you suppose Jesus had to eat over those three days? Probably not much more. But his compassion was for others.

Jesus then says something which is another important thing for us to hear. *“If I send them home hungry,”* he says, *“they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance.”* If I do nothing, it will result in the suffering of others. My failure to respond to a situation has consequences - often serious consequences - for others. That’s why the old traditional prayer of confession says, “Forgive me, Father, both for the ill that I have done, and for the good I have failed to do.” *“If I send them home hungry,”* says Jesus, *“some won’t even make it home.”* Jesus would not – could not – do nothing. Which is why the first word in our key phrase this morning is “Do.” Not don’t; Do. Not “think about,” or “consider,” or “maybe.” No. “Do.”

His disciples answered, “But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?”

“Where in this remote place...” If only we were someplace else. If only there were more resources readily available. If only you would send them away, and make them someone else’s problem. But they’re not. They’re here. So often, our response to a situation of need is to come up with all sorts of reasons why we can’t do anything about it. “If I were standing right there, I wouldn’t let that child starve.” “If only those needy people weren’t so far away, I would do something about it.”

Jesus’ response? “Well, this is where we are, and they wouldn’t make it home anyway, so tell them to sit right down here.” He doesn’t let wishful thinking and the all-powerful “if only” get in the way. “Let’s do what we can right here, right now.”

His disciples answered, “But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?”

There’s not enough here. There are too many people. The problem is too big. There are all sorts of reasons not to respond. There are always all sorts of reasons not to respond. Jesus’ response? *“How many loaves do you have?”* “I’ll bet when we really take a look, we might find that you have resources enough to provide some help after all.”

“How many loaves do you have?” Jesus asked. “Seven,” they replied.

Seven. Seven wasn’t much. It was maybe more than the disciples needed for their immediate survival; but it certainly wasn’t enough for the rest of the week, let alone for the entire foreseeable future, which is how we like to manage our resources.

Seven loaves wasn't much, but it was, in fact, enough to share. It wasn't going to solve the whole problem – what one of us could ever hope to solve the whole world's problems – but it was something. And when shared, it proved, with the help of Jesus and a few fish the disciples didn't immediately admit to having, but shared once they got into the spirit of the thing; it proved to be enough. *“The people ate and were satisfied,”* it says. *“About four thousand were present.”* And if that weren't enough, *“Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.”* Somehow, when we share with the needy, when we give generously in the name of God, we never end up with less. Somehow, we end up with more.

In short, Jesus and the disciples looked at the situation, and felt for the people in it. They realised that if they did nothing, there would be grave consequences. So despite their location, despite their limited resources, they did what they could, where they were, with what they had. That's all that Jesus asked the disciples to do. That's all that God would ask of any of us. *“Do What You Can, Where You Are, With What You Have,”* says Jesus, *“and leave the rest to me.”*

The disciples took this lesson to heart. The early church was known for its compassionate outreach to the needy. A few weeks ago, we talked about Tabitha, who graces one of our Stained Glass Windows. She was known for *“always doing good and helping the poor (Acts 9:36).”* Helping the needy in the community, foremost of which were destitute widows, became such a big part of early church life in Jerusalem that a special ministry was established to administer the work (Acts 6). Luke attributes the growth of the early church to such caring response. Our reading from 2 Corinthians details Paul's efforts among the churches he founded to provide relief to the famine-struck Christians in Jerusalem. He makes similar appeals in an earlier letter to the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 16), and to the Christians in Rome (Romans 15:25). He writes:

This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

The Apostles, including Paul, were determined to do what they could, where they were, with what they – and the caring people in their churches – had.

How has that worked itself out here, in our experience of the Canadian FoodGrains Bank at Zion? Well, we can't feed the whole world or solve all the

problems of hunger. But what we could do was participate in a Mission project that could make a difference, in very real ways, to the lives of hungry people around the world. Over the past 11 years, we took what we had – contributions from donations, from concerts, from our Christmas Card program, from wonderful meals like last night’s “Chowder, Chili and Cows.” And we took advantage of where we are – a province with wonderful agriculture and generous landowners, farmers and sponsors – and we invested in seeds, in planting, and in harvesting mostly soybeans along with some barley. And as a result, with the multiplication of our contributions by the planting and harvest and sale of seeds and matching grants, you provided hundreds of thousands of meals to hungry people –and hope in the name of Jesus.

Could any one of us do it alone? Could any of us individually come up with our congregation’s running total of over one million meals? No. But remember Mother Teresa? She said, “I can do things you cannot, you can do things I cannot; together we can do great things.” And we did. And we do. And in doing so, we have changed the lives of deeply needy people in many countries of our world. A miracle. A miracle.

Here’s another wonderful part of that story. Of our story. You know about our Christmas Card program, where you can make a donation to the Food Grains Bank in someone else’s honour, and give them a Food Grains card as a Christmas gift. The card says, “God bless you this Christmas as you are a blessing to others!” On the inside, it says, “A donation has been made in your name through the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, that will help feed the hungry this year!” Or, “That will feed a hungry person.” Or, “that will feed a hungry family.” You know about that, and have been generous in your response.

But let me fill that story out a bit. Many of you are familiar with the Charlotte and Stamper Residences, for Island ladies. Our church is represented on the Board of these residences. About 40 ladies, mostly seniors, call these Residences home. In years past, every Christmas, each lady would receive a Poinsettia for Christmas. While these would brighten their rooms for a while, the plants would eventually wither and die, which is not the most encouraging sight for ladies in similar situations.

A few years ago, the Zion representatives on the Board suggested a FoodGrains card instead of a Poinsettia. Each lady would receive a personalized card, which said, “A Donation Has Been Made In Your Name Through the Canadian FoodGrains Bank, That Will Feed a Hungry Person For an Entire Year!” The ladies loved the cards. I made a visit, and explained to them how those donations work. The thought that they were able to make a difference – that their lives continued to matter – that someone’s life was being saved through them – was transformative. Their participation has increased, to the degree that we were able to say, “...will feed a hungry family for a year.” There aren’t many better ways to celebrate Christmas than that.

Does our participation in the FoodGrains Bank solve the problem of all hungry people? No, it does not, any more than in feeding the four thousand that day long ago, Jesus and the disciples didn't solve the problems of all the hungry people in long-ago Galilee. But they didn't do nothing. They did what they could, where they were, with what they had. That we haven't permanently solved all the food shortages around the world with our participation in the FoodGrains Bank shouldn't discourage us. We've made a start! We've made an impact! We've made a difference! And what else did Mother Teresa say? What was her secret in ministering to the endless needy of Calcutta? "If you can't feed a hundred people," she said, "then feed just one." That, too, is a start.

This year, we're planting more crops again, working together with landowners and farmers and sponsors, and "Doing What We Can, Where We Are, With What We Have." And if you've been inspired by this story, or by Jesus' story, or by the story of the great things, with the help of God, we've been able to do, then I would ask you to take a look at the needs which are in our world, and allow God to move your heart with compassion. I would ask you to believe that responding to the problems of others will diminish your own. I would ask you to consider not what cannot be done, but what can be done, and the consequences of doing nothing at all. And I would ask you to consider the resources with which you have been blessed, and how sharing those will not leave you with less blessing in your life, but with more.

I'll give the last word not to Teddy Roosevelt, but to Mother Teresa again, who said, "Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love."

Actually, Mother Teresa would want Jesus to have the last word. And he asked this question of us – of you, of me:

"How many loaves do you have?" Amen.