

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, November 24, 2019 – 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; Luke 9:12-13

Sermon: “How many loaves do 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.

Luke 9:12-13 NIV

Late in the afternoon the Twelve came to him and said, ‘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.’

He replied, ‘You give them something to eat.’

Some stories, it seems, are more important than others. And you can tell which stories were of greatest importance to the Early Church, for they are the ones given prominence in all four Gospels. Two of the Gospels even tell variations of the event. And there is only one story given such prominence among all the events in the Gospels – the Feeding of the Multitude. Six times, we hear it.

It made such an impact on those first Christians that providing food for the hungry became one of the defining characteristics of the church – there was even a special ministry established to manage the sheer scale of the outreach, which had outstripped the abilities of the Apostles to oversee. Following their example, St. Paul made it a cornerstone of Christian response in the churches he founded, such as in Corinth, as we heard in our reading earlier. And of course, in the famous Parable of the Sheep and Goats, Jesus speaks of the provision of food to the hungry as a sign of those destined for the Kingdom of Heaven.

What was it about the Feeding of the Multitude, and the many retellings, which made such an impact upon the followers of Jesus? And what can this event teach us about what it is to follow, as those destined for the Kingdom of Heaven? Put yourself in the shoes (or sandals) of the disciples, as Jesus challenges them; it is not only to them, but to you and me he is speaking:

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 following in the footsteps and example of Jesus, 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. To follow Jesus is active, not passive; to follow Jesus is not so much about the things we do not do, but rather the things we do, in fact, do. Not "think about," or "consider." 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, Jesus. 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." "If only I had a million dollars – or better make it five million – I could share in a way that would make a difference." But Jesus 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."*

In other words, there are all sorts of reasons not to respond. There are always all sorts of reasons not to respond; for us to do nothing. Jesus' response? Doing something is always better than doing nothing. And now Jesus gets down to the real question: "*How many loaves do you have?*" Jesus asked.

Stop saying you can't do anything at all. You've got something to share, something to give. Time. Talents. Resources. You've got something. We've all got something. There's something each of us can do. "*How many loaves do you have?*"

"*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 small fish the disciples didn't immediately admit to having, but shared once they got into the spirit of the thing; it proved, with the miracle of multiplication, 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. And somehow, when we do it together, together with one another, and with the blessing of God, it is amazing just what can be accomplished.

To sum up, Jesus - and, reluctantly, hesitantly, but ultimately 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. As I said in last year's Missions Sunday sermon, borrowing from no less than Teddy Roosevelt: "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. 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 (2 Corinthians 9:12-15):

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 12 years, we took what we had – contributions from donations, from concerts, from our Christmas Card program, from wonderful meals like tonight'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 approaching one and a half million meals? No. But maybe you remember last year's sermon (I flatter myself here) featuring 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.

Does our participation in the FoodGrains Bank solve the problem of all hungry people? No, it does not. Neither did feeding the multitude that unforgettable day long ago solve the problems of all the hungry people in 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! "If you can't feed a hundred people," Mother Theresa said, "then feed just one." And thanks to you, together we've fed thousands.

This year, we're planting more crops again, working together with landowners and farmers and sponsors, and following in the footsteps of those who have followed in the footsteps of Jesus. And if you've been inspired by this story, 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.

Last year, I concluded our Foodgrains Sunday sermon with yet another Mother Theresa quote: "Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love." But even more important is the question Jesus asked his disciples, and in asking them, asks you, and asks me:

"How many loaves do you have?" Amen.