

How Do we Make a Difference in a World Overwhelmed by Need?

Third in the series "Questions from the Floor"

July 25, 2004

[Mark 6:30-44](#)

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Prayer of Illumination: Holy God, send your spirit upon our hearts that the words I speak and the message we hear may be yours alone. Bless now the reading of your word, that through it, we may become more faithful disciples.

Third in our series called "Questions from the Floor," is a question I am asked on a regular basis: **How Can We Make a Difference in a World Overwhelmed with Need?** To be honest with you, it's a question I ask myself many days. If we let ourselves really look at the world around us, we may become so overwhelmed that we find ways not to see. We may look away or surround ourselves with other things to look at. But as Christian people, I believe that we can't help but look, see, and want to respond.

We can't hide our heads in the sand when every day people die in Iraq, when AIDS is ravaging the people of Africa, when there is extreme poverty on every continent and just outside our own doors.

People on the street ask for a dollar; elderly people cannot afford their medication; and the situation with children is devastating. Did you know that in our own state of Tennessee...

- a child is born into poverty 35 minutes
- a child is abused or neglected every 32 minutes
- 2 in 11 children are poor

At times it seems easier to focus on our own homes and our own church and not see all the need in the world and in our own communities. It's not that we don't care; it's just that it feels so overwhelming. Jesus said, "Go Ye into all the World," but at times it feels like all we can do is get through the day. We get overwhelmed, weary and discouraged.

I wonder if that's how Jesus felt as we enter the text we read today. At this point in Jesus' life, people had heard about him and were clamoring to hear him speak, to touch him. It seems that everyone has a burning need. He healed many of them, but on this particular day he is weary and discouraged. He has been separated from his disciples for a while. They have just returned from traveling two by two through the countryside and brought back with them the dark news of the death of John the Baptist, a totally unnecessary death at the whim of a young girl. Jesus wants some time alone to grieve and to find rest. He says to the disciples, "Let us go away by ourselves to a lonely place and rest a while."

So they do. They climb into a boat and sail away to escape the crowds, but the crowd has so many needs, and Jesus is what they need most. The crowd follows, and finally Jesus and the disciples moor their boat and get out into the crowd.

As preacher and author Barbara Brown Taylor points out: Though he had every reason in the world to look at the clamoring crowd and feel exhausted, angry, resentful, judgmental or just too tired, Jesus chooses **compassion**. He looks at the crowd, and with those kind eyes sees not a needy mob, but a collection of precious people---a woman with a sick baby in her arms, a man with a malformed hand, a young boy whose eyes are full of questions as he dangles his lunch basket in front of him. Jesus lays aside his need and focuses on theirs. Even though he is exhausted, he gives a great deal and teaches all afternoon long and into the evening.

Since it is getting late and nearing supper time, the disciples suggest that Jesus send the people away so they can get something to eat. But Jesus doesn't want to send the people home, so he tells the disciples to give them something to eat themselves.

I imagine that the disciples looked at Jesus with overwhelmed, if not disgusted faces. How could *they* who had no money, no food, and no energy possibly feed 5000 people? Even trying would be a waste of their limited resources. Let someone who has more do it; or even better, let these people find a way to feed themselves. But Jesus sends his followers out into the crowd to see what food they can find.

Is stepping into that crowd really so different from stepping into the world around us? We all know what it feels like to face a hungry crowd, a hungry world with five loaves and two fish.

- Our public schools have too little money, too many failing students, and now leaks! The system is too broken, Lord. The problem is too big.
- Dozens of people with mental illness wander the streets, because the hospitals are too full—there is not enough space to go around, Lord. The problem is too big.
- Whole countries are perishing from malnutrition—everything we have would not help, Lord. The problem is too big.

There is nothing we can do, Lord. The need is too big, and we are too small. Send them away. Do not ask us. There's no way we have enough to go around, so let's just go home.

But, Jesus says to them and to us, "How many loaves do you have, go and see."

What do you have to offer? Look closely!

A few years ago, I took a group of senior high students to be part of an inner-city mission trip. All 12 of us were tired and unsure when we arrived at our destination, and we tumbled out of our van to find ourselves in a very poor neighborhood. We were housed in an apartment in subsidized housing and we were told that for the next week...

- we would help rebuild condemned houses for elderly people living in poverty; *we would assist at a local daycare for 175 poor children;
- we would try to entice the neighborhood youth off of the streets; and
- we would serve two meals a day a soup kitchen.

We lived in the middle of poverty; we were surrounded each day by people who didn't seem to have much hope and who daily faced what looked like insurmountable obstacles.

They had big hopes for us, but truth be told, we didn't paint well, much less know how to refurbish a house. We loved children, but we weren't sure how to even keep up with 175 little children. And those youth who hung out on the streets seemed to laugh at our pitiful little band of white-collar kids. In other words, we wandered in as five little loaves and two scrawny fish. We felt inadequate, and it showed!

At our back-home gathering that first night, we wondered what in the world we were doing there. It had taken us hours to knock down one wall, three little children had dissolved in tears during "duck-duck-goose," and the soup kitchen ran 30 minutes late, because it took us longer than expected to make the sandwiches. We were weak, weary and disappointed, and we felt completely overwhelmed. *Our five loaves and two fish didn't just feel inadequate, they WERE inadequate—no question about it!*

The next day, our building task included painting the outside of some houses. As we laughed and painted (sometimes each other), a few of the local teenagers came over to watch, then to join in. One of the elderly men who would live in a refurbished home came by to give us tips and bring cold water. The children at the daycare center must have taken pity on our group; they took our hands and told us what they liked to do and even showed us how to color pictures of Jesus. *We were just five loaves and two fish, but things were getting better. There was hope!*

By the third day we not only had the sandwiches ready on time, we had found joy in talking to the guests at the soup kitchen—one even played the piano while another led singing. None of us could play, and we really should NOT be allowed to sing in public, but *somehow our five lonely loaves and two old fish were becoming enough.*

By the sixth day, none of us wanted to leave. At our last back-home meeting, one of my youth said, "you know, we came here to bring Jesus to these people, but the truth is, He's already here." It's true!!! We just had the privilege of joining Jesus in what he was already doing in that neighborhood.

It seems pretty clear: We went to that inner-city neighborhood feeling inadequate with five loaves and two fish, but we came out fat with 12 baskets to share. Not because we did anything right or because we had so much to give, but because God met us there—in the midst of our inadequacy. God took our willingness and matched his gifts with ours. That's something to remember when the crowd looks huge, the odds are not good, the situation seems too hopeless. It's something to remember when our own resources look inadequate: Jesus is there, meeting us more than half way, waiting to make us abundant.

There's no question that when we look and are willing to really see, the need all around us is overwhelming. Some days we may have to just go home and bury our heads under the covers, but maybe this story of five little loaves of bread and two measly fish has a message of hope for us. To our human eyes, we seem inadequate, but from God's view of things, we are the loaves and fish, and our potential is endless!

Look and see how many loaves you have!

Do you love children and know that the public schools need help? You could volunteer to be a tutor at Idlewild Elementary. You may think you don't know how to teach, but God can use whatever loaf you offer.

You may not know what to say to people who are homeless, but if you're willing to join us on Thursday nights at More Than a Meal, God may take your willingness and surprise you with new friends and a broader understanding of who God is!

Maybe you remember how challenging it can be to be a teenager, and you think you might want to be a youth leader here at the church. Hold that bread up to God, and see how it might make a difference.

You probably recall your favorite Sunday School teacher and would love to be that person to a child, but you're just too busy or feel sure you don't know the Bible well enough. Be willing to try and see whom God may touch through you.

If Jesus can take simple, inanimate things like bread and fish and use them to feed 5,000 people, just imagine what he can do with us.

Jesus said for us to "go see how many loaves we have." Look for the gifts you bring and the gifts this church has to share. How many loaves do we have? Any answer will do. What do we have to offer? Let's find out and do with them the same thing Jesus did with bread: Let's take what we have, bless it, and give it as best we can.

Isn't that what Jesus calls us to do?

Let's take what we have, whatever we have and be willing to lift it to God.

Then let's *bless* it—thank God for what we have and make it holy by trusting it to God.

And finally... let's *give* it to whoever is standing near—spread it around—never mind that there seems not to be enough to go around.¹

It's not up to us to feed the whole crowd, to solve the big problems, or to fix the whole world. It's up to us to share what we have, to feed whatever big or little hunger is right in front of us.
AND TRUST THAT GOD WILL DO THE REST!

For now, for our part, let's go see how many loaves we have—so somehow we may be God's loaves and fish.

Amen.

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¹ *Mixed Blessings* by Barbara Brown Taylor; New Interpreter's Bible Commentary

Mark 6:30–44

30 The apostles returned to Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. **31** And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. **32** And they went away in the boat to a lonely place by themselves. **33** Now many saw them going, and knew them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns, and got there ahead of them. **34** As he went ashore he saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. **35** And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a lonely place, and the hour is now late; **36** send them away, to go into the country and villages round about and buy themselves something to eat." **37** But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." And they said to him, "Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" **38** And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." And when they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." **39** Then he commanded them all to sit down by companies upon the green grass. **40** So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. **41** And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. **42** And they all ate and were satisfied. **43** And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. **44** And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men.

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