



Loaves and Fishes

Luke 9: 10-17

Several years ago I volunteered to serve the campus ministry at the University of Louisville. We were focused on our fundraising auction and a young woman offered to lead our efforts. As chairman of the board, I met frequently with her and our pastor to plan for the event. A month before the date, she sent a text indicating she just couldn't handle the responsibility.

Then, the volunteer we'd depended on to manage the decorations had a family emergency and was not able to assist. My mother went into the care of Hospice, and I became distracted. The week of the event, the auctioneer backed out. Beleaguered, I felt panic rising.

Can you relate?

Are there some days that you just want to run away from it all? Perhaps life has become too much. You've been running 24/7 without a break, and you're "plumb tuckered out" as my Granny used to say. Whether it's a quiet place in your home where you can sit alone and contemplate or a full-blown vacation, we all need our space from time to time.

The same was true for Jesus and his disciples, particularly as his reputation grew more and more. People were coming from near and far to hear what he had to say and to witness his miraculous acts. Just as we do when we find ourselves overwhelmed, Jesus sought out a quiet place for him and his disciples to reconnect with one another.

¹⁰ When the apostles returned, they reported to Jesus what they had done. Then he took them with him and they withdrew by themselves to a town called Bethsaida, ¹¹ but the crowds learned about it and followed him. He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God and healed those who needed healing.

No matter how hard we try, sometimes we just can't get the quiet time we need. There doesn't seem to be a place to hide, at least not for long. Life comes calling and sometimes it intensifies, even when we are diligent, working at it, and doing our best.

¹² 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.”

¹³ He replied, “You give them something to eat.”

They answered, “We have only five loaves of bread and two fish—unless we go and buy food for all this crowd.” ¹⁴ (About five thousand men were there.)

To be fair, the disciples were tired. Jesus had empowered them – giving them the power and authority to preach and teach his message that the Kingdom of Heaven had arrived. They had been out in public telling people that the Messiah they had longed for had arrived.

Now, they had come to Bethsaida to rest and share with their teacher all the things they had seen and done in the name of God. Instead, the throngs of people followed them. They watched as the crowds grew exponentially as people swarmed about to see and hear Jesus.

In their exhaustion, the disciples saw the growing multitude as a problem they didn’t know how to fix. They were in a remote place without resources. They themselves were depleted. It was simply easier to send them away rather than address the situation.

Sound familiar?

How often do we look for an easy way out of our troubles? When the problem is too big and there seems to be no likely way out, how do we respond? Will we ever learn? Our world is full of problems. We will always have trouble in our lives, there is no escape from difficulties.

Jesus, busy with teaching and healing the sick, saw this multitude not as a nuisance or a problem to be fixed. Rather, he saw an opportunity.

But he said to his disciples, “Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each.” ¹⁵ The disciples did so, and everyone sat down. ¹⁶ Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke them. Then he gave them to the disciples to distribute to the people. ¹⁷ They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.

Jesus did not run away from the problem. Instead of turning the people away, he faced the issue and worked through the problem. He drew upon the resources available at the moment.

Sometimes when we are overwhelmed, tired, or confused, we don't recognize the resources that may be right in front of us. If we've dealt with a problem for a long while, perhaps we have closed our minds to any possible solution.

Was exhaustion part of the disciple's problem? Or could it also have been a lack of empathy for the needs of the people?

Either way, Jesus gave them a front-row seat to witness the power of an amazing God. The lesson he was about to deliver was not simply about serving the sick and the hungry. He demonstrated faith in action and served with compassion.

He asked the disciples to invite the crowd to get comfortable and to be seated in small groups. He wanted everyone to enjoy the meal he was about to prepare.

He did not scoff at the meager number of fish and loaves. Instead, Jesus thanked God for the provision – the blessing that there was any food at all. In faith, he began dividing portions of food among the disciples. He trusted God to provide for their needs.

God flipped the script on that day when the disciples and the entire crowd witnessed an incredible miracle take place before their very eyes. Jesus showed how God can create a way when there doesn't seem to be a way.

I know this story well because I witnessed this miracle when the board of campus ministry felt all was lost regarding our fundraiser. We recognized that God was speaking through our troubles. There was no doubt we were totally dependent upon God for the outcome. We redirected our focus and prayed for God to take control.

When the event finally arrived, our reservation numbers were bleak. Yet, we prayed, thanking God for his provision – his blessings. Our attendance was indeed much lower than the previous year, but our income more than doubled.

Jesus turns problems into opportunities. As we share our troubles with him and learn to trust him, he opens doors. He creates options, and clears the way for outcomes we would never consider on our own.

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Study Questions

- How do you handle responsibilities when things get tough and you're tired?
- What were the disciples learning from this dinner on the grounds?
- How does this story of loaves and fishes challenge your thinking as you consider a problem you are facing?
- Have you ever discovered resources that you did not know you had? How did you use them? Did you feel God was present?

Further Study

If you liked this story, you may also enjoy reading 1 Kings 17:1-16 when God provides for the widow of Zarephath and 1 Kings 17:2-16 when Elijah is fed by the ravens.