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Luke 9:1-17

27th Message

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GIVING WHAT WE'VE BEEN GIVEN

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

I've been spending more time with my mom lately. It is easy for me to be thankful for her. I learned a lot from my mom. It was her actions, more than her words, that taught me the most. She knew how to love people, and her greatest joy and special gift was hospitality. Every chance she got she invited visiting missionaries into our home, or host students from traveling choirs. As a kid I was the envy of my neighborhood because my mom would throw the most elaborate and fun-filled birthday parties.

One particular talent she had was in decorating our kitchen table in a wide-variety of themes—not only everything in green for St. Patrick's Day, or red for Valentine's Day, but themes like sunflowers, and watermelons, and ladybugs. These special table-settings were an outlet for her creativity and hospitality. She wanted to communicate to all who came into our home, whether long-time friend or new acquaintance, "you are important and I have prepared a place to welcome and bless you." Your mother may have been like that too.

Our passage this morning has a consistent thread of the importance of hospitality running through it. Those who show hospitality express the welcoming heart of God. As we look at the beginning of Luke 9 this morning we read of how Jesus ratchets up a notch the education and training of his disciples as they graduate from pupils to apostles, sent ones.

And he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. (Luke 9:1-2)

The disciples have been following, watching, listening, and learning from Jesus for quite a while and now it is time for them to become "fishers of men." Jesus gathers them all together and equips them with everything they need to accomplish what he asks of them.

They are to proclaim what they heard Jesus proclaiming: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the good news!" (Mark 1:14,15)

As they go from village to village their proclamation, accompanied by the power and authority to release those who are in bondage to demons or disease, provides evidence that God's kingdom and favor has come. It is a time of liberation and restoration so that all are invited to believe this good news and "repent," turn to the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength.

This is a good reminder that our outreach, as individuals and as a church, must come in word and deed, preaching and healing, penetrating the community with both truth and compassion. The disciples' mission is specific and concise, and so too are their traveling instructions.

And he said to them, "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics. And whatever house you enter, stay there, and from there depart. And wherever they do not receive you, when you leave that town shake off the dust from your feet as a testimony against them." (3-5)

Though they would be traveling for weeks, if not months, they must travel light. Jesus tells them to "take nothing for [their] journey," no staff (for protection), no bag (to store any items), no bread (to satisfy their hunger), and no money (as a safety net). They can take one tunic, but not two. They are his ambassadors, but unlike ambassadors representing any other king they are sent out not with the trappings of grandiosity, but in the spirit of dependency. Why would Jesus send them out with such unique instructions? I can think of at least three reasons:

1. To mature their faith:

Everything about this mission forces them to rely upon God. Their power and authority comes from him, and they must completely rely on his provision supplied through the hospitality of others. They would experience first-hand that their ministry's effectiveness had nothing to do with their worldly resources and everything to do with the spiritual resources which the Lord had given them. Jesus wanted this mission to be a venture of faith from first to last.

2. To demonstrate their integrity:

When they reach a town, the first home that welcomes them is the house they are to stay in until they leave that town. They are not to move from house to house begging for support or hoping to find better accommodations. This makes it clear for all to see that their mission is not for personal gain, but for the blessing of those who hear and receive their message.

3. To deepen their relationships:

By arriving into each town humbly, gently, and in need of the hospitality of others, they were forced to build bridges relationally and seek help from the ones they were there to help. The length of their stay in each home created an opportunity to nurture authentic relationships and deep connections with their hosts.

The apostles would be living out the "Parable of the Sower." They would be the ones planting seeds wherever they went, and it is in the context of close relationships that the soil of the heart is best prepared to receive the good news. The apostles will find some hearts receptive and others unreceptive.

When the apostles and their message are not welcomed, they must move on to the next village, leaving those who reject the good news with a "testimony," (a sign, a warning) that the townspeople would have understood. Pious Jews would often shake off the dust from their feet when departing pagan territory as a sign of removing any defilement that may have clung to them. For the disciples to do this communicated in dramatic fashion to the townspeople that by rejecting the disciples and their message, they were choosing to be no different than those who reject God himself. The disciples' shaking off of dust from their feet is a gesture to help the townspeople see the

seriousness of what they had done and perhaps lead them to repent and believe the good news.

Officially commissioned and fully equipped by Jesus, the twelve go out with his power and authority and do all that he had charged them to do.

And they departed and went through the villages, preaching the gospel and healing everywhere. Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was happening, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen. Herod said, "John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?" And he sought to see him. (6-9)

Traveling village to village with their bold proclamations and miraculous healings it comes as no surprise that their activity grabs the attention of the highest-ranking political official in Galilee, the tetrarch Herod Antipas. Herod always had his antennae up for anyone who caused a big stir.

As reports come in to him of all that Jesus and his disciples had been doing, he is perplexed because there is little agreement as to the true nature of Jesus except that he is clearly some sort of prophet. Some say he is John the Baptist come back to life, but Herod dismisses that rumor because he had had John beheaded. Others say that Jesus is one of the prophets of old, maybe even Elijah appearing on the scene again.

This brief "behind the scenes" cameo of Herod and his advisors is not only a sobering reminder of the political context of Jesus' ministry, it also raises the question of Jesus' future and the part Herod will play in it. We all know what he did when he felt threatened by John the Baptist, what will he do to Jesus?

Before any action is taken he wants to see Jesus face to face and determine for himself Jesus' true identity. His question, "who is this about whom I hear such things," hangs in the air unanswered. It is the most important question posed throughout this gospel, and Luke makes clear that the question of Jesus' identity and one's response to him must be considered by all, from Gentile to Jew, from poor to rich, from lowly subject to royal ruler; each individual must eventually decide for themselves "who is this Jesus?" It is a question each of us must answer as well.

While Herod ponders this question, Jesus and his disciples continue their good work.

On their return the apostles told him all that they had done. And he took them and withdrew apart to a town called Bethsaida. When the crowds learned it, they followed him, and he welcomed them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing. (10-11)

Upon their return from their first mission tour, the twelve report back to Jesus all that they had done. In an effort to withdraw from the ever-present crowds to debrief and find rest, Jesus gathered his disciples and took them away to a place outside the town of Bethsaida on the northeast shore of Lake Galilee.

The attempt to get away privately was not successful however, because the crowds continued their relentless pursuit of Jesus. Instead of turning them away in anger or frustration he had compassion on them and graciously welcomed them, sharing with them the good news of the kingdom of God and healing those in need.

Jesus' heart for hospitality was without limits, but the disciples had had enough.

Now the day began to wear away, and the twelve came and said to him, "Send the crowd away to go into the surrounding villages and countryside to find lodging and get provisions, for we are here in a desolate place." (12)

As the day winds down and sunset approaches, the disciples identify a problem. Dinner-time is drawing near and there are no "fast food" options nearby, so the disciples approach Jesus and urge him to wrap it up. They want him to dismiss the crowd so that they may head out to the surrounding villages and fields in order to find food and shelter before it gets too dark.

What the disciples view as a problem, Jesus sees as an opportunity.

But he said to them, "You give them something to eat." They said, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people." For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, "Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each." And they did so, and had them all sit down. (13-15)

Having just returned from a mission where they had to trust in the provision of the Lord through the hospitality of others, Jesus reverses the roles in this situation and says, "now it's your turn." He gives the twelve an opportunity to express hospitality to others in their time of need.

Though they have just returned from a wildly successful mission trip depending on the Lord's provision for them, the disciples are bewildered by Jesus' request and do not know where to go for provision.

After they huddle together and take stock of what they have they come back to Jesus and say, "all we have between us is a few loaves of bread and a few fish, definitely not enough to feed a crowd over 5,000...and surely you don't mean for us to try and buy food for this massive throng, do you?"

The one option they did not consider was to humbly come back to Jesus with a request of their own: "Yes Jesus we will feed, will you please provide?"

I relate well to the disciples here. I like to think of myself as a pretty caring guy, sensitive to the needs of others, and quite practical when it comes to getting things done. Because of my conservative nature, and my small faith, I don't easily consider the unlikely or the improbable or the miraculous. I tend to focus on the possible, the probable, the likely.

Why risk disappointment and failure by thinking and praying "BIG" and "outside the box" when thinking "small and safe" and "inside the box" has a much greater chance of "success." To my dismay, the idea that I should ask Jesus for a miracle does not often enter into my thoughts and prayers.

Are you like that? You want to do what the Lord asks of you, but your first response is usually something like "all I have is this Lord, and it is definitely not enough. I simply don't have what it takes. I don't have the time, the energy, the ability, the resources, or the courage to do what you are asking me to do." If that's you then pay close attention to what Jesus does next.

And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing over them. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And they

all ate and were satisfied. And what was left over was picked up, twelve baskets of broken pieces. (16-17)

The disciples' lack of progress does not bring a rebuke from Jesus, nor inhibit them from being ministers of blessing. As I see it, the disciples handed to Jesus more than just their limited food. They also offered their limited faith, their doubt, and their fear. Jesus took what the disciples offered, and after the blessing he broke the loaves and gave the disciples bread to set before the crowd. The literal translation is that Jesus "*kept giving*" them bread.

Luke makes it clear that this was not a light snack. The crowd was "*satisfied*," a term used of fattening animals by giving them so much food. The huge crowd was not just given enough to tide them over for a little while, they ate until they were completely full.

Imagine yourself in the shoes of the disciples. Here you are faced with a hungry crowd, a crowd Jesus has asked you to feed, and he takes the pitifully small amount of bread you offered him and after blessing it he breaks it, places it in your hands, and asks you to give what you've been given to those who are hungry around you. They receive all that you give, so you keep going back to Jesus for more, and each and every time, miraculously, there is more from Jesus to give.

How gracious of the Lord to include the apostles not only in distributing the food, but also in collecting the abundance. As they carry a basket full of bread each disciple literally feels the weight of God's abundant goodness.

It takes time, but the disciples eventually learn well the lesson Jesus was trying to teach them. In Acts chapter 3 we read of Peter and John going up to the temple to pray and encountering a man lame from birth. The man wanted them to give him money but Peter directed his gaze at him and said,

"I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. And leaping up he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. (Acts 3:6-8)

"What I have I give to you" is a powerful statement that reflects well the privilege given to us by the Lord. The disciples were sent out into a world much like ours: sorely in need of God's mercy, grace, forgiveness, and restoration. Some of your family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and classmates are full of empty religion and therefore filled with hopelessness, others are full of education and yet filled with spiritual ignorance, or full of possessions and yet filled with emptiness, and still others are ravaged by sin and in need of spiritual and physical healing.

Our mission, as a church body and as individual believers, is wrapped up in God's mission.

As Jesus gathered his disciples, equipped them with his power and message, and sent them out to give what they had been given, so too are we, his church, gathered, equipped, and sent.

Every Sunday we celebrate together our life in Christ. As "gathered ones" we rejoice in being God's children, worshipping him in song and reflecting on his word, as "equipped ones" we are empowered by the presence and gifting of the Spirit of God who dwells within us, and as "sent ones" we feed others by proclaiming the good news that in Jesus can be found life, liberation, and true healing.

If you feel overwhelmed being a "sent one," skeptical that your paltry resources are up to the task of blessing those in need, then I've got good news for you. It is not in our resources or our strength or our intellect or our persuasiveness that the miraculous comes. We are simply called to obey, to step out in faith and give what we've been given, trusting in the God who multiplies.

God knows how frail and fragile our faith can be. He is wonderfully compassionate, and infinitely patient with us in our journey of faith. What a great comfort it is to know that, as we give what we've been given, the source of any blessing is God alone, and he supplies generously, abundantly, overwhelmingly.

Jesus is the Bread of Life that nourishes. Jesus is the water that quenches spiritual thirst. We are simply the ones who offer the bread, we are simply the vessels that pour out the living water within us. Without pressure or pretense we can joyfully and hospitably set before those around us the only meal that truly satisfies: Jesus Christ. "*Freely you have received, freely give.*" (Matt 10:8).

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