

Having faith while feeling empty  
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(READ Luke 9:10-17)

Today's passage is the famous feeding of the 5000. I say famous because this is probably one of the best known stories about Jesus; maybe one of the best known stories in the Bible. It ranks up there with stories like David and Goliath and Noah and the flood. By the age of around 6 years old most children raised in church learn that Jesus feed 5000 people with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. It opens our eyes to the power and compassion of Lord. The gospel writers must have thought it was important, too, because all 4 gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) all include this story in their gospel accounts. Did you know this is the only act or story of Jesus (other than the crucifixion narrative) that's included in all 4 gospels? There's all kinds of important stories and teachings about Jesus, right? The parable of the lost sheep; the account of his birth; the amazing transfiguration moment, which we'll read about later in Luke 9. But this is the only story that all the gospel writers include.

And they actually use the story for different purposes. Do you know what I mean by that? I mean that the various gospel writers use this story to highlight or emphasize different qualities about Jesus. To show you that, turn with me to John 6; read with me selected accounts (vs. 5-6; 14):

- (vs. 5-6) - notice how John says that Jesus is looking to test the disciples. Luke doesn't mention that, though that's what I think is happening. But there's a cautionary tale in this: you have to be careful what you import from one account to another. Sometimes you'll see authors or hear pastors combine stories and the details, but you don't always want to do that. The gospel author is telling you everything he wants you to know in his gospel; there's a reason why he didn't include all the details and that reason is because he has his own purpose in retelling an account and he's telling you everything he wants you to know.
- (vs. 14) - Here's John's big idea or big point. Oftentimes in the gospels you'll learn the point of a parable, the point of a story in a summary statement at the end. This is John's. "Look what Jesus just did! He is the Prophet we've been waiting for!" John is using the feeding of the 5000 as proof that Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah!

Luke has a different aim than John. Certainly, it's true. Jesus is the One and feeding 5000 people plus women and children certainly shows he is divine. But Luke has a different angle and his angle is still about faith. That's Luke's focus in chapters 8 and 9 so let's see what he has to say today with the hope that our faith in Jesus would deepen more and more.

To begin, I'm curious if you're wondering, maybe even a tad bothered, that Jesus would ask his disciples to do something that they can not do. Did you notice that? They don't have food to pass out, they don't have the money to go buy food for that many people and they don't

have the supernatural ability to multiply a meal like Jesus. Yet, look at what Jesus says in vs. 13, “But he said to them, ‘You give them something to eat.’” You! You do it!

I’m wondering if you ever feel that way? Do you ever feel like you have this need in front of you, but you just don’t have what you need to meet it? Maybe you don’t feel like you have the strength; you don’t have anything left in the tank; you don’t have the ability to keep going. I’m looking at all you moms out there; it’s 3pm and you have no idea how you’re going to make it until 10. I think we all have. I’ve had many weeks where my schedule was full; I had very little margin in my life. And it felt like God didn’t care because as the week went on more and more stuff got added to my plate wear a hard week turned into an impossible week; and I remember asking, “God, what are you doing? Don’t you see I’m full to the brim?”

Luke is using this story to help us have faith in God in those moments; at those times when it feels like we’ve got nothing to offer Jesus is coming to tell us saying, “I’ll provide for you. I know you’re at the limit of what you can provide, but I’m not. I’ve got more. I’ve got more provision; I’ve got more resources for you. Don’t stop bearing fruit. I’ll give you what you need.” Jesus doesn’t want us to stop bearing fruit even though it doesn’t look like we can. He wants our faith in his provision, in his grace, to be so rooted in our life that we keep holding fast to his word and bearing fruit when it seems impossible. Let’s look at that in the text.

Jump back with me to Luke 8:14; it says, “And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.” The situation that the disciples are in and the concern for food fits in the *cares* category. That word *cares* means *anxieties or worries pertaining to life*. Jesus is saying in Luke 8, “Don’t let your cares, your anxieties, your worries about your earthly life stop you from bearing fruit for God.” An enduring faith that holds fast to Jesus’ words doesn’t let the worries of life, as well as its riches and pleasures, stop it from bearing fruit for God. This reminds me very much of Jesus’ words in Matthew 6 where he says (vs. 25) “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on.” What? Why wouldn’t we be anxious or concerned about such things? Instead, he says in vs. 33, “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” Look what Jesus is saying: don’t stop seeking my kingdom, keep making my righteousness your top priority even when you have needs of food, clothing and shelter. I’ll give you those things; I’ll keep providing.

We need to remember that serving God, using our time, our resources and our energy in work for God’s purpose is a fundamental need we have. Did you catch that? You and I *need* to work for God. We don’t usually think that way. We usually think we need water, food, clothing, rest (of course, we Americans are really good at making that list really big... a fairly new vehicle, cable TV, a cellphone... we need these things). Serving others in the name of Jesus or working for the kingdom of God usually fits into the “when I have the time” category. After I take care of all of my needs like going on family vacation and playing in the weekly bowling league and getting enough me time... the time I have left over I can use to serve others (as long as it fits my

gifts and a few other stipulations). The Bible doesn't speak that way; The Bible says you need to be in service to others in the name of Jesus; you need to be working for kingdom purposes of God. Let me tell you why I think that.

First of all, the created order tells us we were made to work and serve. Did you know the very first thing God did after he made man and woman after his own image was bless them and then instruct them to serve? Genesis 1 says that man and woman were made in the image of God and then the very next verse says (1:28), "And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the seas and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" Ok, now that I've made you, go do the work I've prepared for you. Go be productive. Go serve the rest of creation; you're in charge now. We were made for this; God made us exactly as we are so that we would do the work he's assigned us to do.

Not only does the created order tell us we are to serve and work for the Lord, but our new creation tells us, too. Eph. 2:10 says, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." This creation that Paul speaks of in Ephesians is our new creation; it's our new life with God being born again. And when God saves us Paul says we are the handiwork, the workmanship of God. It's like God has a workshop where he makes very important, very intricate, instruments and tools to accomplish very important and unique tasks and work. It's his handiwork, his craftsmanship; that's you. And he's made you this way in Christ *for good works*. For them! Do any of you men have tools in your garage that you don't use much? We all do, right? But you used them once! And you might use them again! They're not ornaments on the wall, are they? Yeah, they look good, but that's not what they're for. They're for doing something. And so are you; you are for doing something. You're for doing the good works God prepared for you to the praise of his glory.

Friends, that's a mindset thing. You and I need to settle that in our minds and in our hearts; that's why we are here and that's why we are saved. I'm born to serve others in the name of Jesus; I've been born again to serve others in the power of God's Holy Spirit. It's a fundamental need I have. And the point the passage is making and I'm wanting to highlight this morning is that even when you feel empty, even when you feel like you're at the end of your resources, that's still the mentality, the disposition that you should have in life.

Now, I'm guessing some of you might be struggling to hear this as good news. Maybe you've come this morning and you feel wiped out. You're exhausted. You feel like all you ever do is give and you're tired. What about a little R&R? How about a little me-time and some recreation? Where does that fit? If that's what you're thinking, I am glad. That means you are feeling the rub where you're supposed to feel it.

There is absolutely a place and, dare I even say, a need for rest, for a sabbath break, for a little refreshment and recreation. In fact, that's what some of you need to start doing. I'm

thinking some of you have gotten caught up in the demands of your life, but haven't learned how to meet those demands with an effective rhythm of work and rest, service and refreshment. I'm frequently tempted to pridefully overestimate my ability and underestimate my need for help and for rest. So, there absolutely is a place for it. But (and this is so important) rest, refreshment, recreation, breaks fit into a life of service. Most of us get it backwards. We fit service into a life of rest and recreation. Do you see the difference? The difference is the mindset of your life. If the mindset of your life is focused inward on yourself then service will be an optional activity you try to squeeze in. Friends, you will always be out of sync in your relationship with God if that's your disposition in life. That's not why you were created or born again.

I'm a little nervous about sharing this information with you. On the one hand, for those of you who have a mixed up mindset, where you live for recreation and rest and squeeze in service, you might use what I just said to support that outlook on life. "See, pastor told me I need to find time to hunt and fish." No, you got the wrong message; get out of the tree stand and start putting your hand to the gospel plow. But then there are others of you out there that might feel guilty for trying to find or schedule any breaks or rest. Developing a rhythm in life that includes quiet times with God, with your husband, with your Bible, exercising your soul and your relationships is exactly what you should do. Don't feel guilty about that. Your life of service will even be more fruitful when you humbly include rest in your rhythm. And then we're given trials, challenges, where it doesn't feel we have anything left in the tank; it feels like we're supposed to suspend all kingdom activity and Jesus is saying still in those moments, "Seek first my kingdom and my righteousness." But we're going to be tempted to say, "But Jesus, I've got nothing. I've got no bread, I've got no money to buy bread, I can't keep going!" And Jesus is going to say, "Yep, you don't have more, but I do."

Let's look at the story. The need is momentous. That's the point of the first half of vs. 14, "For there were about five thousand men." They're counting families here; there were more than that. The disciples looked at the challenge, we're supposed to look at the challenge, and think, "Impossible!" But look who serves all these people; vs. 16b, "Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd." So the disciples take the loaves from Jesus and they go and serve the people, right? How many disciples were there? 12. Look at vs. 17, "And they all ate and were satisfied. And what was left over was picked up, 12 baskets of broken pieces."

Friends, that's the point. That's what Luke wants us to see. The disciples had nothing at the start of this story. No food, no money and no supernatural power. And Jesus gave them a task (a test, too), "You give them something to eat." The only way that they can do this for the people is if Jesus provides and does he ever. After all their work and service to others, the disciples each have a basket of food in front of them. They started empty, but they ended full.

That's the message for you and me; we may be starting empty, but we will end full. Now, let's get practical. Now, let me draw you a diagram to illustrate how this works in our life.

- Box are the limits of your life - The box doesn't change; these are limits that God has given you.
- Your life consists of bubbles - work, church, health, marriage, recreation, parenting, grandparenting.
  - The size of the bubble indicates how much you give of yourself to those areas
  - The box doesn't change, the bubbles do... and they must.
  - But when you change the size of one bubble, you have to change the size of others.
- Lastly, all of your life should be on the move in service of the kingdom.
  - Sometimes, it's moving swiftly because things are going well and everything is in right proportion.
  - Other times, it's slower because the troubles of life are great... but it's still on the move seeking first the kingdom of God.

Friends, believe that Jesus will provide. Trust him that he will not leave you empty. And watch God do amazing things.

#### Questions for the week

- What keeps us (what might keep you) from having a serving mindset?
- Is it realistic to think that we can keep serving when we are empty? Why or why not?
- What do we need to know about God and about ourselves to keep us serving others when we don't feel like we have anything to offer?