

Limitations Turned to Possibilities

Luke 9:10-17

Sunday, February 24, 2019

I have mentioned in the last few sermons that the present church needs to concentrate its efforts on developing the spiritual characteristics of hospitality, responsibility and respectful relationships through a spirit of openness in order to meet the challenge of this age and to carry the message of Christ into a divided world. The last of the spiritual characteristics the church needs to carry into this world is a passionate faith, that still believes that limitations are not the end of our experience. To believe God is still real and to believe God can change your life. Also, to believe that there are still endless possibilities that lie before us. We are not confined to cynicism, pessimism, or even powerlessness when confronted with what others see as impossible.

The faith of the early church, and the many that have followed, with its passionate understanding of the power of God, have carried the church into its future. Every generation, but especially this one, needs to believe that the same power that resided in the gospels is still available today. But before we go into the world with God's power we must understand it. What does the power of God have to do for the world? Is it only there to make us happy? Is it there to achieve confidence in order to find success? While all these are not antithetical to what Jesus wants for us, there is a larger issue at hand. God is on the prowl to create justice, to help us overcome our lack of compassion and to help us overcome our sin--which is also a lack of faith. God's power is present to create in us the possibility, and therefore in the world, the mission, which is redemptive, hopeful and ready to change the world from its destructive habits.

The story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand surprises the experience of the disciples' life. This event had the ability to create a hope of possibilities within an overwhelming sense of limitations. Faith was required to see the possibilities before them, but it was difficult to process. The disciples were somewhat reticent to see what the power of God could do in their midst. It was their lack of faith in the seriousness of the most situations that caused Jesus to fast forward their learning curve.

Whenever we come across a story in the gospels, or any story for that matter, that becomes so familiar, we are in danger of being complicit with the common interpretation. We are in danger of reading it in the simplicity of traditional interpretations. Not that it always leads to wrong

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interpretations. It doesn't. But it fails to provide new possibilities of discovering the meaning and faith behind it. Therefore we must back up briefly to read again the context of this story. It happens, just after the disciples return from a victorious mission to spread the gospel, they were given the task of going into the villages around them. They were told to take nothing to the villages, just preach, heal and depend upon the power of God for their daily bread, which comes through the generosity of people. Upon their return they entered a political crisis. John the Baptist was killed by Herod. Outrage and spiritual powerlessness was present in the community. God was on the docks. They couldn't find God, only bewilderment. It was then they came out to hear Jesus. They were abandoned by God, no direction and struggling to remain loyal to their leaders. Hope was on the run and someone needed to bring it back.

But in coming out to meet Jesus many did not bring anything to eat and most likely complaints were mounting. The disciples panicked. "Let's go to the store in the city to get some food", they said. Jesus put a stop to that because he had another plan. He needed to restore hope, not only feed empty stomachs. But in the end feeding empty stomachs was the same thing as restoring hope. After the success of their mission the disciples thought they were ready, but they could not sustain their faith. Instead, they returned to the standard solutions. They had been out in the world with nothing and relied on God for their sustenance. They depended on the generosity of people. But in this situation they could not. When limitations of food became an issue, all they could think to do was to be conventional and uninspired by buying food. They panicked because of the fear and desperation of the people in light of John's death and their need for the Messiah. But what could Jesus do to brighten their hopes, that the Messiah was coming, and was here.

Theologians have offered two interpretations of the Feeding of the Five Thousand provided throughout the centuries to direct us toward what Jesus offered that day. The first interpretation is that Jesus multiplied the loaves miraculously. From his hand he kept putting food into the baskets by God's power, which is reasonable and answers the question of how he gave them hope by drawing attention to his Messiahship through power. The other interpretation is that he drew attention to the need and gave people the opportunity to rise above their selfishness by sharing their food. Each has its own rationale and both satisfy the main goal of what it is we need. We need someone to help us see the benefit of faith in God and trusting in others as we share our lives together following God. Jesus raised their hopes that day, no matter which interpretation you prefer. The Messiah was in their midst sharing the purpose and hope

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