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BETTER THAN FROM SCRATCH

John 6:1-15

I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that Laurie and I watched an episode of *The Chosen* that depicted the scene when Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs to preach. When Jesus explained to the disciples what he was asking them to do they looked stunned. It was like a portrait of 12 deer in the headlights. They didn’t know what to say when they preached. They didn’t know how they were going to get anyone to listen to them. They were afraid of opposition. Then Jesus dropped a bomb on them when he told them he wanted them to heal people like he did. How were they supposed to do that?

What a daunting challenge that was for them. But that was only the first step in a larger challenge. Jesus would eventually tell them that he wanted them to take the news of the kingdom of God to the entire world after he was gone. Estimates of the world population at that time range from about 150 million to 300 million. If Jesus told our little group of people in our church, a group not much larger than that group of disciples, that it was up to us to broadcast his message of good news about the Kingdom of God to hundreds of millions of people, how would you feel? It would feel overwhelming to me. How are we supposed to do that? Just us? There’s no way we can do that!

I went to college like many of you during a period of radical activism. I went to a small college that was relatively conservative, but even there my first couple of years there were demonstrations, controversy, and there was even a bombing on campus. I was involved in a very active, aggressive on campus ministry. That ministry fit in well with the spirit of change dominating the larger culture. It challenged students to “Come help change the world.” I had a New Testament that this ministry produced that had a cover with the title *Blueprint For Revolution*. When I graduated I went to work for that ministry, excited about seeing God changing lives and changing the world. I was assigned to work at Long Beach State University. I was there for 4 years. There was a pivotal moment in my last year there that I still remember. I had an appointment to meet with a student at the Student Union building right in the middle of that campus to have lunch together. A little before noon I was waiting for the student and watching the many students on their way to classes. There were 32,000 students at that school. In the middle of the day there was a 10 minute break between classes when it seemed like every one of those 32,000 was on campus going from one class to another. I watched as huge swarms of students were walking by. As I looked at the massive number of students busily going about their lives it hit me, “We’re not changing the world.” In fact, it seemed to me that we weren’t even making a dent. The size of the task was overwhelming and defeating. Like those first disciples Jesus has called us to an overwhelming task.

In Mark’s account of Jesus’ life he puts the events we are going to look at today immediately after the mission trip where Jesus first sent the disciples out. I don’t think that was a coincidence. Jesus gave the disciples a task that seemed overwhelming, even impossible. The events that follow were intended to teach them crucial truths as they undertook that mission. These events speak to us as well as we also face what might seem at times like insurmountable odds. What Jesus intended for us to learn in these incidents is critical for us not just surviving, but conquering in life. Let’s look at John 6:1-15.

JESUS GAVE HIS MEN AN ARE YOU KIDDING?

Jesus went across to the far side of the Sea of Galilee, but at this point in his ministry his popularity was soaring. People had never heard teaching like his, and they definitely had never seen anyone perform miracles like he was doing on a regular basis. So when Jesus got in a boat to go to the other side of the lake, people followed him on the shore. He ended up with a huge crowd around him.

Verse 10 tells us there were about 5000 men in the crowd. That would not be a huge crowd for a Padre baseball game. It’s about the size of a late season game in the bad old days when the Padres had been out of pennant race since May. However, that’s a large crowd for a meeting. But that’s not even the extent of the crowd. John says there were 5000 men. That doesn’t count women and children. Conservatively that would mean there were at least 10,000 in that crowd. It could have been even larger.

Matthew 14:15 says late in the day it became obvious to Jesus’ disciples that people in the crowd were hungry, so they told Jesus he needed to send the crowd away. They were concerned about dealing with thousands of hangry people. The next verse says Jesus responded, “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.” John gives some insight on how that conversation went. Verse five tells us that Jesus asked Philip where should we buy bread for these people to eat? John informs us that he asked Philip this because he wanted to test him. In other words this was going to be a test of faith not just for Philip but for all of the disciples. Philip answered it would take more than half a year’s wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite.

A number one combo at In-N-Out now costs $7.20. Inflation is hitting everywhere. But think of how much money it would take to feed a crowd of 10,000 or more people. For a combo of one burger, fries and a soda that amounts to $72,000! It is a safe bet that the disciples didn’t have anywhere near that kind of money. At least as large a problem is imagine going to a fast food restaurant, maybe to the drive-through window, and ordering 10,000 number one combo meals. I’m pretty sure that’s not gonna go over very well.

Andrew had tried to help. Apparently he had gone around asking people if they had any food that they might be willing to share. When I read the story it reminds me of an incident in Laurie’s and my life that happened quite a few years ago. We had been given tickets to the Rose Bowl game in Pasadena on January 1. We had four tickets so Laurie and I went along with Toby and one of his best friends from college named, appropriately, Andrew. The tickets included a parking pass, so we parked in the designated parking areas on the golf course right next to the Rose Bowl Stadium. When the game ended we went out to our car to drive home. That’s where we found out we had made a mistake. We sat there in our car waiting to be able to drive out of that parking lot for almost 2 hours. We could not even move 5 feet. Since we were just sitting there, at one point Toby and Andrew decided that they were hungry and they wanted to find something to eat. Their method was a little bit unusual. There were quite a few groups sitting around still tailgating since they all knew that they weren’t going anywhere until the parking lot cleared out quite a bit more. So Toby and Andrew went around to various groups chatting with them and asking if they had any extra food that they could share. Yes that’s right, they basically were begging for food. It made me so proud that my son obviously had learned something in college. I think he learned it from one of the classic incidents from his college days. There was a point when a girl he had been dating decided that she just wanted to be friends with him because she was more interested in another guy. Toby took it hard and decided that he was just going to let himself go. So he let his beard grow and his hair grow and he got really raggedy. One day he and his buddies had gone surfing and after their surfing session they decided to get lunch at Costco. Toby’s friends told him to sit at a table and save it and they would go order the food. So there was Toby sitting there at that table looking very grungy after his surfing session with his long hair and his long beard and kind of crummy T-shirt and board shorts. At one point a woman walking by stopped, handed him a $20 bill and said, “God bless you.” Then she walked away. Toby was confused and had no idea why she had given him that money. Then he realized what was going on. She apparently had taken him for a homeless person and was trying to help. He called out to her, “no wait.” But it was too late, she was already gone. Evidently he learned from that experience and put that lesson to work that day in the parking lot at the Rose Bowl. Whatever the case, it worked because Andrew and Toby ended up getting quite a bit of food to eat before they returned to our car. Apparently Jesus’ friend Andrew attempted something like that. He went around trying to find food but all he could find was one small boy willing to share his lunch of a few pieces of bread and a couple of small fish. Essentially the boy had what amounted to two fish tacos.

It was generous of that boy to share his lunch and a nice try by Andrew. But two fish tacos weren’t going to go very far for a crowd of 10,000 people. Everybody would get one 5000th of a fish taco. That would be less than a bite per person. Imagine trying to divide a Rubio‘s fish taco into 5000 pieces.

WHAT JESUS PROVIDED WAS ENOUGH

Fortunately, Jesus had a better idea. He told the disciples to have all of the people sit down in groups of 50 or 100. I am sure that they were confused by this and had no idea what Jesus had in mind. How was having people sit in organized groups going to help with the fact that they had no food? They were about to find out. Jesus took the little boy’s lunch and began dividing it up after praying. Somehow the two fish tacos just kept coming. Jesus kept handing food to his followers and they kept passing it out to the groups sitting on the grass. Long after the two fish tacos should have run out the food just continued to come. No doubt the disciples were completely stunned and had no idea how this was happening. After everyone in the crowd had been given all they wanted to eat, the disciples still had food left over, 12 baskets full left over. 12 baskets. That’s an interesting number. Pretty hard for them not to make the connection that there was a basket of food left over for each one of them.

Occasionally you’ll hear someone ask if something a person has cooked or baked is made from scratch. I know that means it is something not involving pre made ingredients. It is all original ingredients. How far do you have to go for something to qualify as being from scratch? Astronomer Carl Sagan said if you really want to make an apple pie truly from scratch you would have to create the universe. I get that’s what from scratch means, but where does that expression come from? Why from scratch? Scratch is what you do when you itch. What does that have to do with making food? The explanation I have found is from scratch means from the beginning and it came from early races, where a starting line might be a scratch in the dirt. Sounds dubious to me, but you get the point. In this case, my suspicion is the meal Jesus gave people was better than from scratch, because it was the best meal they ever had, plus they didn’t have to do anything to get it.

This was an astounding feat by Jesus. The Disciples have seen Jesus do a number of amazing things by this time. He started off with the water into Wine trick and had followed up with a steady stream of astounding miraculous healings. But this was a miracle on a grand scale. This demonstrated power over matter. They watched as food just kept coming when there should have been no food left. What a kick it must’ve been for them to be handed another basket of food, go pass it all out, then come back and get more. People had to be asking them, “hey where are you guys getting this food?” And they would just answer “Jesus is providing it all.”

APPLICATION

JESUS CALLS US TO BRING WHAT WE HAVE

There are a couple of points at which this incident touches our lives. First, think about what Jesus knew about this situation. It was obvious that feeding these people was a monumental task. There was no easy way to meet that need. Jesus knew that the disciples had no way to solve the problem. It was far beyond them.

This causes me to ask why Jesus would have even asked them to do something about the problem. Ultimately, as we will see, it was because he was going to teach them about trusting him, but there was another implication they would surely have seen. Jesus wanted to bless this crowd of people. They had a need and he wanted to meet that need. But he was going to use the disciples to do it. He was going to involve them in the process. He wanted them to see that he had called them to bless the people, to help meet their needs.

Jesus said to his men, “Bring what you have to me.” Jesus did not need to use the disciples, and he certainly did not need the little bit the disciples could come up with. Even Satan had acknowledged that Jesus had the ability to turn rocks into bread. He created the universe out of nothing, so making a banquet appear out of thin air would not have been a problem for him. He involved them and he asked them to bring what they had managed to come up with to the task because he wanted to teach them something about his plan for them.

This has implications for us too. Jesus wants us to be involved in his effort to bless the people around us. He wants us to participate in his campaign to bring life and grace to people. But the cool thing is he only asks us to bring to the task what we have. He doesn’t call on us to be something other than what we are just like he didn’t demand that somehow the disciples produce food they didn’t have.

I recently read a story that resonated with me because it was written by a guy named Dr. Jerry Root who was a prof at Wheaton College. He was in the Vienna airport waiting for a flight when he was approached by a young woman wearing a badge on a lanyard and carrying a clip board. She was taking surveys and asked him to participate. He asked her name and she said it was Allegra. He asked her about herself and her life. He found out that her mother had abandoned the family to go live with her new lover in Canada. Her father was filled with bitterness that was toxic. She had a brother who was in Vienna but she was estranged from him. Jerry said, “It sounds like there’s a lot of estrangement in your life.” She said there was even more than he knew. She had a long time boyfriend who had gone to Florence for 6 months. When he came back he told her he had found another woman there and he was leaving her. This had happened the day before her conversation with Jerry. She was obviously crushed. He said, “I know you need to ask me some questions for your survey, but when you’re done, I have something I need to tell you. I have been sent here to tell you something.” She was immediately wary, suspecting he was a plant from the airport and was checking up on her to make sure she was doing her job. He told her that it was nothing like that. She rushed through the survey, then put down her clip board, looked him in the eye and said, “What have you been sent to tell me?” Jerry said, “Allegra, the God of the universe knows you and loves you. He will never abandon you. He loves you.” She looked stunned, and he had to repeat it a couple of times. After the third time she began sobbing. She said, “But I’ve done many bad things.” Jerry said, “He knows all about it. That’s why he sent Jesus to die for our sins to bring us forgiveness and hope.” There in that airport that woman found that forgiveness.

That is such a cool story. I wish I had lots of stories like that, but I don’t be ecause I’m not like Jerry Root. Years ago I met Jerry Root before he was a professor. He was a friend of some good friends. I got to know him and admired him. He is a terrific guy who is gregarious, outgoing, a natural leader and people are drawn to him. He is a natural evangelist because he has a way with people. And I’m not like him. Most of us are not like him, which is why we typically don’t have experiences like that. Jesus doesn’t ask us to become like Jerry Root. He only asks that we bring what he has given us to the task of blessing people. What we can learn from Jerry Root is that he cared about that woman. That’s something we can all do. We may not do it the way he did, but we can all care. And that’s what Jesus wants us to bring to this task of bringing his blessing to the world around us.

Heather Burke Cody is a writer who recently told of an experience she had of just bringing what she had to the situation. She was shopping and was in a check out line with 6 people in front of her. She said the cashier was one of the most unhappy, maddest people she’d ever encountered. She seemed to get more impatient and exasperated with each passing customer. She got especially incensed with Heather when one of her items needed a price check. Heather wrote that as the grumpy woman rang up her items she felt what she called a “soul nudge.” Jesus was prompting her to bless this woman. She didn’t want to do anything because the woman seemed so unpleasant. But Jesus insisted. So when she paid her bill she handed the woman some extra cash when the lady gave her the receipt. The woman was caught off guard. She gripped the cash, then lowered her loud, stern voice and quietly said, “Why?” Heather just said, “Soul nudge.” There was a pause, then the woman grabbed her hand. She said, “Today is my 75th birthday and no one has called me. Not my sister. None of my kids. No one here. Nobody, nothing. I don’t think I can ever remember being so sad. Nobody even remembers my birthday.” Heather didn’t do anything dramatic. She just gave what she could, and it made a difference.

JESUS PROVIDES MORE THAN ENOUGH

Jesus has just sent them out to do something that they were not capable of doing. He had shown them that he was able to equip them for a task they could not do. He was asking them to do something that for them was impossible. So that day he asked him to do something else that was impossible. He told them to feed a crowd of 10,000 people when they had no food, little money, and no place to buy food even if they had money. When he told them to give those people food, they had no way of obeying his command. They simply did not have what was needed to feed that crowd. But Jesus did. Not only did he have enough for them to be able to feed that entire massive crowd, but he added an extra! By making sure that each one of them had his own basket of food left over he gave them their own personal reminder that Jesus had more than enough to supply what they needed to do what he told them to do.

There was a clear message that if they relied upon their own resources, whatever they were able to come up with would be pathetically inadequate for accomplishing what Jesus wanted them to do. Their only hope was to trust in what Jesus would provide for them like he did that day when he fed that an enormous crowd. That would be a crucial principle for them to live by. It is crucial for us to live by also, for Jesus is asking us to do things we simply can’t do.

One of those things is he has called on us to be his witnesses. He wants us to take his message to the world around us. That’s an intimidating thing for many of us, maybe for most of us. This story is good news for us. That task is greater than we can accomplish. We know that’s true from the fact that in Ephesians 2 Paul tells us that we are all dead in our sins spiritually. And the only way that people actually are able to enter God’s kingdom is if God makes them alive. We can’t make people alive spiritually. That’s something only God can do. That means that our task is just to care about people and to be open with them and be willing to tell them what God has done in our lives. Be ready as Peter said to make a defense for the hope that is in us. God can even give us what we need to do that.

I sometimes think of a couple that were in our church a long time ago. They were an older couple who had a thorough understanding of the truth that God supplies what we need and it’s not up to us to provide food for the hungry masses when we don’t have any food. They were amazing at how they could relate the gospel to people around them. They were just at peace, didn’t need to force anything on people, but were just open with people. It was interesting to see how often God used their loving interest in other people to open up possibilities for them to share about how the grace of God had impacted their lives. They just believed that what God would supply them was enough.

There are other ways that God asks us to do things that are beyond our ability to do. For instance, he tells us that he wants us to overwhelmingly conquer in every situation. Literally Paul said we should hyper conquer. My problem with that is, I can’t do that. I don’t master every situation I encounter. I wish I could. There’s a guy in our neighborhood who is a sort of know-it-all, so sure of his opinions, and he’s got them about everything. I don’t hyper conquer in conversations with him. I’d love to be more assertive and dominant, but I’m just not. I often feel sort of defeated after interactions with him. How am I supposed to hyper conquer with him?

Toby and Anna once had a dog named Doc. That dog was the craziest dog I have ever known. He was one weird piece of work. To say that he was hyper active would be like saying it gets slightly warm in Phoenix in the summertime. It’s technically true but it doesn’t capture the essence of the thing. One time Toby and Anna were going to leave their dogs with us for a couple of nights. Doc was at his worst when someone would leave the house. He would literally go crazy. So Toby and Anna came up with a plan for when they left our house. They put Doc in our guest bathroom which is right by the front door. then they closed the bathroom door so Doc wouldn’t see when they left the house. They hoped that this would avoid the usual mad scene when Doc went insane because somebody was going out the door. I suppose it worked to some extent because at least he didn’t go screaming and running around the house, but he did get frantic because he was aware that someone was leaving. After Toby and Anna were able to leave the house we felt it was safe to let Doc out of the bathroom. That’s when we discovered there was a problem. The bathroom door was locked! Apparently Doc had gotten frantic when Toby and Anna were leaving and started pawing at the door and somehow he had hit the little lever on the door handle that locks it and had managed to lock himself inside the bathroom. We couldn’t open the door to let him out! There is a little tool that you can use to open a locked door in our house from the outside but we couldn’t find the tool. How are we going to get him out of that bathroom? I said to him, “Doc, can you pop the door handle and move that little lever to unlock the door please?“ The problem is, he was totally unable to understand me and to do what I was asking him to do. He simply was not capable of comprehending what needed to be done and doing it. And that’s true of me when God tells me to conquer in every situation.

Honestly, I don’t feel like I can conquer in any situation. But we need to remember what it means to win. How do we conquer? In Philippians 1:19-20 Paul revealed that winning is exalting Christ. It’s not beating someone else. It’s not winning arguments. It’s not always coming out on top in conflicts. It is exalting Christ, which might even look to the world like losing. But how can we be sure to exalt Christ in every situation?

The key is simply trusting in every situation that what God supplies will be what I need for this day. A critical component of this ability to conquer is contentment. In Philippians 4:12-13 Paul said, “I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.”

Contentment is a powerful thing and it is a big component of being able to conquer in all situations. But contentment is a hard thing to find in people. It is difficult to be content when you are dealing with hard situations and disappointment. I was thinking about the men in the next generation of our family. Both Toby and Michael have accomplished career goals that they have pursued for many years. Toby is now an attending physician in emergency medicine, Michael is now an airline pilot with Delta Airlines. However, both of them are now finding that things in their jobs are not as they would like them to be. In both their jobs things are very different than they were 10 years ago. They are not different in a good way. So there is a temptation for them to be disappointed and discontent with the way things are right it possible for them to still be content where they are?

Paul said it is possible to be content no matter what your situation. It’s helpful for us to remember that when he wrote that he was incarcerated and had been for several years. He had been treated very unjustly. Despite all of that he said he was content. That says to me that contentment is possible in any in every situation. We just need to learn the secret of being content.

What is the secret of being content? What can enable us to be content no matter what our situation is? Jesus gave us the answer in a visible way in this incident that we have just been looking at. The answer is that Jesus gives us all that we need and more to get through this day and do what he has for us to do. What Jesus supplies for us today is sufficient.

We have a tendency to believe that contentment is something that comes from outside of us. We think it is a function of the right set of circumstances. Earlier this past year there was an article in the *New York Times* about people leaving New York City. Perhaps you saw the article just last week that said lots of people are also leaving California. The only state that has a bigger exodus going on is New York. The article in the *New York Times* explained that thousands of people in the last few years have moved out of the city into smaller towns and more rural areas seeking relief from the pressure and stress of the city. The article was written not because people were leaving but because recently many of those people are moving back. They thought they were going to find just the right situation where they could be at peace and be content out in the small towns and in rural areas. They have been surprised to discover that they didn’t find peace and contentment out in those smaller towns and country areas and so now they’re moving back to the big city. Contentment isn’t something you go someplace to find. It doesn’t exist outside of you. Contentment is something inside you and it goes with you wherever you go.

There is a secret to being content and the secret is believing that God will give me what I need today for this day. This is the day the lord has made I will rejoice and be glad in it. Today he has given me enough. He has given me enough to do what he wants me to do today, to be what he wants me to be and to be content this day right where I am. Jesus had enough food for an impossible situation. He has enough for us today wherever we are.

I was reminded recently of my own experiences when talking to a friend whose son has been working for a Christian organization that requires him to raise his own support. For 4 years after college I worked for a ministry that required that I raise support. I was not good at it. The result was after a couple of years my support level got so low the organization told me I had to take several weeks before going to my summer assignment and raise support. I prayed about it, went home and worked on drumming up support. After spending about 4 weeks doing that not only had I not gotten my support up to the needed level, I had actually managed to lose support. I was worse off than ever. Perhaps I should have taken a page out of Toby’s book. Maybe if I had let my hair and beard grow and began to look like a homeless person people would take pity on me and give to my cause. But probably not. My support raising time was up. I had to go to my summer assignment. But I knew I could not continue in that ministry with support as low as mine was. There was the threat that I was going to just have to quit in the fall due to lack of funds. I went to my summer assignment. While I was there I began getting communication from people who were committing to support me. This was not delayed responses from my previous efforts. They were random people suddenly showing up willing to help, people I had not talked to. By the end of that summer I had more support committed than I needed. And I had done exactly zero to make that happen. God did it. It was like he showed me something that I learned was impossible for me to do, and then he did it, just like Jesus did that day when he fed that massive crowd. I brought what I could to the task, and it wasn’t enough. But Jesus had more than enough. He always does.

Yes God has given us some great challenges. Jesus is giving us things to do that are beyond us. He’s going to put us in situations that are difficult at times. But here’s the good news, he gives us what we need to be content and at peace in every situation if we will just trust in him and do what he tells us to do.