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The Gospel of Luke
XXIX. Five Loaves, Two Fish
Luke 9:1-17

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To be a disciple of Jesus is not only to be called to Jesus, but also to be sent out by Jesus. In other words, Jesus calls us to Himself in order that we should be saved by His grace and nurtured in His love. But He also then sends us back out into the world to serve Him and to serve the cause of His Kingdom. True discipleship is found in just this pattern of going in to Jesus and being sent out by Jesus. It is, in fact, the fundamental pattern of our weekly devotion to Christ. He gathers us into this sanctuary on Sunday morning, where we are fed by His Word and Spirit. And then He sends us back out on Monday morning to serve Him in the world through the power of His Word and Spirit. And when the week is done, our efforts exhausted and our spirits flagging, He calls us back in to worship again – and we are resurrected and renewed and made ready again to be sent out on Monday morning.

To be a disciple of Jesus is not only to be called to Jesus, but also to be sent out by Jesus. We see this pattern also in our Scripture reading from Luke this morning. The disciples, having been called by Jesus to follow Him, have now been with Him for some time – learning from Him, receiving His grace, being inspired by His example. Now the time has come for them to be sent out – they are ready now. Jesus calls the twelve together and sends them out “*to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.*” Which the disciples, no doubt to their own amazement, are actually able to do! And then, mission trip accomplished, they come back in to Jesus to tell Him all that has happened. And He takes them to a quiet place where they can be recharged in His grace, renewed in His love, and re-inspired by His Word and example. Only, after a while, the crowd finds them again. And Jesus then sends out His disciples in service again: “*You give them something to eat,*” He commands them. The disciples go out as commanded – and the next you know, the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand has occurred. To be a disciple of Jesus is not only to be called to Jesus, but also to be sent out by Jesus. And to neglect the one for the other means our discipleship will become unbalanced. We are saved in order to be sent.

But there is something else revealed about our discipleship in this passage. And that is, that in sending us out, Jesus will always first equip us with just exactly what we need in order to be able to fulfill the mission on which He sends us. As He sends out the twelve to proclaim and to heal, first He gives them the power and authority that they will need to do precisely that. In fact, they are so well equipped by Jesus, that He assures them they need take nothing else on their journey – they may rely on Him alone, and on what He has given them.

And Jesus does the same for us. Now, unless I am mistaken, Jesus has not called any, or at least not many, of us to be miracle healers – so that particular power and authority has not been given to us. But He does call us all to the first portion of the disciples’ mission – which is to proclaim the kingdom of God to others; as well as to serve others, to help others in His name. And for this mission – the proclaiming of His Kingdom and the service to others, Jesus equips us also with everything we will need, just as He did the twelve.

For, in the “coming to Jesus” portion of our discipleship, does He not equip us with His Word – so that we will know what the Gospel actually is, so that we will have words to describe what God has done for us and to describe His Kingdom which is coming, and so that we will know what it means and what is required of us in order to love and serve our neighbors as He sends us out to do? We are equipped with His Word – that we might share that Word, be guided by that Word, serve others in accordance with that Word. Everything that we need to fulfill His command.

For example, a young woman named Deborah, a disciple of Jesus just like us, ran a bookstore. One morning, she arrived to find waiting outside the store a man dressed in the traditional garments of a Hasidic Jew. As she unlocked the door, he asked if he might come in. The store was not due to open for another hour, but he seemed harmless, so she let him in. She turned on the lights, started getting ready for the day ahead, when she noticed that instead of looking at the books, he was just standing there in front of the desk. So she asked him if he needed any help. “Yes,” he said. *“I want to know about Jesus.”* She led him to the religion section and began showing him some books she thought might be helpful. But he said, *“No. I want to know about Jesus the Messiah. Don’t show me any more books. You tell me what you believe.”* Panic – what would she say, how should she respond? But as she began to talk about her faith in Jesus – hesitantly at first, but stronger as she kept going – talking about what Jesus meant to her, what Jesus had done for her, she discovered she had all the words she needed. That while she had never had a class on personal evangelism, she had everything she needed already to talk to this man about her faith – to proclaim to him the kingdom of God. Through Sunday worship, Sunday School classes, Wednesday programs, prayer groups, personal devotions – Jesus had been equipping her all along for just this moment. His Word enabled her to faithfully speak words of witness to this man. Three months later he was baptized in her church.¹ Jesus sends us out to proclaim and to serve – but first He equips us with His Word. We, like the twelve, do not lack anything we need to fulfill our mission.

And not only with His Word, but also with His Spirit – helping us to recognize the right moments, the opportunities He opens us before us. And also helping us, empowering us, enabling us as we do so. His Spirit in our spirits – prompting us, inspiring us, enabling us. Bob Slocum, who was CEO of a large manufacturing company, tells of a manager who came into his office one day in obvious distress. He told Slocum that he and his wife had separated the night before. Up until that moment, Slocum says, he didn’t even know this man was married. So what was Slocum supposed to do – how was he to respond? Now he could have, right then and there, rebuffed this man – telling him that this was none of his business, a personal problem inappropriate for the workplace. He could have shown this man out of his office and slammed the office door behind him. But instead, Slocum recognized that in that moment the Holy Spirit was actually opening a door before him. And so what he did was invite this manager to sit down, and to tell his story. What Slocum did was simply show him the kindness of caring enough to listen. And then, after it

had all come out, there was a pause – a pause into which Slocum knew he was being invited by both this man and the Holy Spirit to speak:

I got up my courage and finally said, “Jim, if you and Joan want to put this marriage back together, I believe there are spiritual . . . resources available to help you do it.” Then I sat there in an awkward silence, wondering if Jim thought I was some kind of fool. He finally leaned forward and looked me in the eye. “I’m not a religious person, but last night I got down on my knees and said, ‘God, if you are out there and care, I could sure use some help.’”²

Through Slocum’s willingness to listen to this man’s troubles, the Holy Spirit opened the door to service, witness, and healing in the name of Christ. Jesus Christ equips us before He sends us. In Word and Spirit, He gives us all that we will need, exactly what we will need, in order to do what He sends us out into the world to do – to proclaim His Kingdom and to help others in His name.

Which leads us to one more thing our passage says about our being sent out to serve as His disciples: namely, that God is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, as Paul puts it in his letter to the Ephesians. To put it another way, Jesus will take our proclaiming, take our serving – and He will multiply what we have done into the very building blocks of His Kingdom. Even if all we have to offer Him are five loaves and two fish, Jesus can take what we do for Him, take the efforts we make for Him out in the world, and cause them to bear fruit far out of proportion. Which is a way of saying that even the smallest thing we do in service to Christ, in service to others, shall never be lost, overlooked, forgotten, or wasted. Jesus Christ takes what we give Him in our service to Him – and He can multiply it into the miracle of His Kingdom’s growth in this world, of His Kingdom’s growth in our hearts and in the hearts of those we are reaching out to in His Name.

Five loaves and two fish – that is all the disciples have on them when Jesus sends them out saying, “*You give them something to eat.*” Five thousand men, not even counting the women and children, says our text. Five loaves and two fish – that is all they have to give. But when the disciples are done, there are twelve baskets full of leftovers – one for each disciple, as it were, as if to show each one how much Jesus can do even with the little we possess to give. Jesus multiplies the good we do as we faithfully go out in His Name. He multiplies our offering in the economy of His Kingdom. He builds His Kingdom through our gifts and our giving, no matter how inadequate those gifts might seem in that moment we offer them

Our Youth, during the Sunday School hour, will be talking about their mission trips this summer – and all the ways they saw God working through them and multiplying their efforts in His Name. I’ll let them tell you their own stories – but I have a story from the Episcopalian preacher Barbara Brown Taylor which echoes the theme of how God can multiply our witness and service. It’s a story she tells of a week-long mission trip to a Navajo Indian community out west. Two hundred and forty young people and their leaders from churches all over the U.S. arrived on a July morning to repair homes on the Navajo reservation. When they arrived, nothing was ready

for them. It turned out the Navajo community leaders didn't really believe the group was coming. Anglos had made promises to them before, they said, and nothing had come of it. So they had just waited to see; and what they were now seeing was not very encouraging – a bunch of sleepy, confused-looking white kids, with not an engineer, plumber, or electrician among them. She writes:

The next morning we were sent out in work groups of five to some forty houses . . . with instructions to build a sheep pen, roof a house, or build a porch. My own group was handed eight boxes of linoleum tile, some scrapers, glue, razor blades, a measuring tape, a couple of doors, and an electric drill. I was delighted with it all but had absolutely no idea how it all went together, nor did any of my crew. The drill provided us all with a good laugh at least, since Frank and Dolly Hart's three-room house had neither electricity nor running water. We had no idea what to do so we just started doing it. The Navajos were amazed by our industry, and we had lots of visitors who came by just to watch us work . . .

Then halfway through the week a funny thing began to happen. Navajos who had been watching us from the sidelines began to pitch in. Old Mr. Hart, who could not walk without a cane, patched the sheetrock in the room where we were working. Larry Silversmith worked all day long on his grandmother's house with another crew and then continued long after they left each night, finishing up whatever they had left undone. At a third work site, a whole crowd of young Navajos showed up to help rebuild Annie Begay's hogan, the traditional log and earth dwelling in which many Navajos live. If a bunch of Anglo kids could come all the way from Vermont to work on old Annie's house, they said, they guessed that the least they could do was help. There were so many of them that they almost put our teenagers out of business, but Annie said to let them work, that it was a miracle. She said she had been praying for the day those boys would wake up from their sleep and do something for someone else. She said it was an answer to her prayers . . .

At the end of the week, forty-two out of the week's forty-six projects were complete. Thousands of dollars had been spent as well as something in the neighborhood of 5500 work hours. The reservation was dotted with new roofs, new paint, new corrals, new tile, new porches. A representative from the Navajo youth organization stood up to thank us. She gave the director of the work camp two Navajo rugs, several portraits of their leaders, a huge Navajo nation flag, and 240 smaller ones for each of us to take home. She said that made us honorary Navajos. She said they would never doubt us again, and when we came back they would be ready for us. And finally, through her tears, she said they loved us and would never forget us.

Do I need to say it more directly? We went into the week . . . with five loaves and two fishes, but we came out . . . with twelve baskets to spare. Not because we did anything right or because we had enough to give, but because God made good on his promise to match our gifts . . . with his own. It is something to remember when the crowd looks too big, the odds too poor, the work too hard, the situation too hopeless. It is something to remember when our own resources look too meager, our efforts too puny, our spirits too low.³

Jesus will multiply our five loaves and two fish – into the miracle of His Kingdom’s coming

“And Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority . . . and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.” We, too, have been called together into Jesus to be His disciples. And we, too, as His disciples, are now being sent out by Him to proclaim and to heal.

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Testimony* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), pp. 21-22.

² Source unknown.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Mixed Blessings* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1998), pp. 99-102.