

Dreaming the Impossible

John 6: 1-15

Deuteronomy 15:7-11

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I. Introduction.

It's a warm spring day, and Jesus and the twelve apostles need a little time to themselves. Jesus has been surrounded by crowds teaching and healing, and he's tired and needs some time apart with his inner circle. So they get in a boat and sail to the far side of the Sea of Galilee and climb up the side of a mountain and settle down on the spread of fresh, new, spring grass to rest and talk.

But as we all know, getting away for a little quiet time is never quite that easy. Even before cell phones and e-mail, solitude was hard to come by; and the crowds, who had been following Jesus eagerly, have discovered him and the disciples at their retreat.

As the weary crowds come up the hill, Jesus wonders aloud how to go about feeding them. But the Gospel writer tells us that he asked the question to test the disciples, because he "already knew what he was going to do." He was testing the disciples to see how they would respond.

And as we might expect, they don't do so well. "How in the world can we feed this many people?" Philip asks. Jesus waits. "It would take half a year's salary just to give everyone a mouthful." Jesus waits. "There's nothing we can do in the face of that need." Jesus waits. "Well, we do have a couple of cheap loaves of bread and some fish." "Ah, now we have something to work with. Have the people sit down and let's share it with them." And then the miracle happens.

II. Homeless in a Land of Plenty

According to statistics from our U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, roughly one million people are homeless on any given night in our country; estimates of the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty put that number as high as two million. There are over 9,000 homeless individuals and families in the District right now. A third of those are veterans, another third are families with children.

So it's easy to sympathize with the disciples and echo their question, "Where are we to find the resources to address this level of need?" And in reality, our situation is even harder, because solving homelessness is far more complicated than providing a meal, or even providing a bed.

When addressing homelessness, we find ourselves plunged into issues of mental illness, substance abuse, education, racism, and gentrification. If only it was as simple as providing someplace for people to live. Available housing is only the first hurdle. It's enough for some small number of homeless folks, but for the vast majority, simply placing them in housing still leaves them wrestling with the demons that brought about the homelessness in the first place.

At Emmaus Services, we had the chance to work with a wonderful older man with an amazing career history and incredible experience traveling the world. But he was wrestling with deteriorating paranoia; and between his own hoarding problem and his landlord's neglect of the property, he was living in a condemned building. We were able to find him a new apartment in a senior building, helped him get a lease lined up, but then couldn't get him to leave his old house. He decided not to pay the rent on the new place and waited for the Marshals to forcibly remove him from his original home, and ended up as the only person I ever worked with who was being simultaneously evicted from two different homes at the same time.

Now we eventually got him in the new apartment, and under a doctor's care where he was stabilized with some medication. But addressing homelessness is a daunting problem. It's complex and requires a wide range of approaches and services and a network of support.

III. Sharing our Loaves

So where do we start? What's the bread that we bring for multiplication today? Let me suggest that our call operates on a number of levels:

First, on an individual level, we are incredible blessed here at Metropolitan with a host of opportunities to address homelessness. For one thing, today after the service you can get outside and walk to raise some money for our shelter ministry. It's an incredibly beautiful day, we can all use the exercise, and afterwards, you're all done. Easy.

As you reflect on the call, however, you may find yourself led to stretch a little further and involve yourself in our shelter ministry. For many folks, that may be a matter of bringing in dinner for our guests. For others, that may mean volunteering to spend the night. I want to encourage you to really think and pray about those options, because our shelter really is one of the incredible resources that we have as a church: many people want to do something to address homelessness, but they don't know where to plug in, how to connect. We have the structure in place here in our church to allow people to plug in, the chance to meet and have dinner with someone who is struggling with homelessness and to hear their stories.

The message of the Gospel is that when we do that – when we take the step to encounter a homeless person as a person – our lives are transformed. When homeless men and women stop being “the homeless” and start being Rebecca or Robert or Terry, something changes in us, and we find that we start seeing Christ in those folks and then in the other folks that we encounter. Let me challenge each of you to take responsibility for one dinner this year. It doesn't need to be by yourself, take your family, take a friend, or pair up with one of the wonderful group of volunteers that currently does work with the shelter. It will change your life.

In our reading from Deuteronomy this morning, we hear God's call to be open-handed and generous with the needy and vulnerable in our community. And we encounter that famous passage in which God says "the poor will always be with you." Now we often use that verse as an excuse: "if the poor will always be with us, than there's really not anything I can do to change that; so why worry?" But that's not what the verse says. The second half of the verse is "therefore, you shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and needy in your land." The verse is saying, that in the ongoing nature of poverty, we have an ongoing opportunity to meet the Lord.

So that's on the individual level; now let's broaden it. While we may "always have the poor with us," I do not believe that we need to have homelessness with us. Homelessness, Friends, is a solvable problem. In the wealthiest country in the history of the world, it is an obscenity to have a million people homeless every night. Our strength as a society is measured not by our number of millionaires, but by how our most vulnerable are cared for; and by that measure, we are a weak country. And our call as Christians is not simply to reach out as individuals to help those in need, but to collectively create systems that address the issue of homelessness. That's the only way it will change.

Here again, we are blessed here at Metropolitan with the structures in place to address homelessness on a city-wide basis. As many of you know, we were one of the founding members of the Washington Interfaith Network, or WIN, which is a group of 45 faith communities who have organized to advocate on behalf of the needs of the most vulnerable in our community. For 13 years we have been building such a strong base of political support that we have been able to have a tremendous impact on the city budget, particularly in the areas of affordable housing and supportive housing for the homeless. And over the past couple of years, the Mayor and the City Council have committed unprecedented resources to our priorities.

But we're in the middle of an economic crisis. And as a city, we've gone from a significant budget surplus this year to a projected deficit next year of \$131 million. And Friends, we all know that projects that looked innovative and creative when you have a budget surplus, often look less critical when you have a budget shortfall.

That means that we're going to have to hold the Mayor and City Council's feet to the fire. Our power derives in large part from the fact that we turn out significant numbers of people to events to which the City Council and Mayor come. Like bringing food to the shelter, this is the kind of opportunity that any of you can do whenever you have the time. Let Ann Michel or someone in the church office know that you'd like to be on the WIN list to get notified for these events. We always have a team going, and would love to have you be part of it.

Now let's broaden it a third time: many of us here are political junkies, and many have strong opinions about which Presidential candidate will do a better job. But as Jimmy mentioned in his sermon last week, no political party represents our values as a church. And Friends, if we as the Church of Jesus Christ are not advocating on behalf of our homeless brothers and sisters, change is not going to happen. It is our responsibility to elect the best people we can, and then hold them accountable to create programs that put the needs of the poor and marginalized first.

Next April, after the elections are over and the next administration is getting settled in, Sojourners – one of our city’s outstanding non-profit organizations – will be holding a three day event called “Vote Out Poverty.” Its goals are to create political momentum to cut domestic poverty in half over the next decade, and internationally to achieve the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals to reduce global poverty. I would like to see us as a congregation taking an active part in that event.

IV. Conclusion

Dear Friends, homelessness is a stain on the dignity of our nation and an affront to every person of faith. Our call throughout the Scriptures is so clear on this, and yet year after year, we continue to allow this blight to persist. I know it’s hard, and complicated, and seemingly intractable. But nothing is impossible with God.

Homelessness is a test for us. “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” asks Jesus. Where are we to find a place for a million people to call home? We start where we are, we give what we have, and we trust in the Lord’s promise to take those gifts and do something miraculous.

Amen.