

July 29, 2018

2 Kings 4:42-44
Ephesians 3:14-21
John 6:1-21

I want you to put yourselves in a different time and place, and as a different person. The time is around 30 A.D and you are a young lad, perhaps 9 or 10 years old. You live with your parents and siblings near the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. On this particular morning your household is bustling, there is excitement in the air.

You don't really get what is going on, except that word has been spreading through your village that "the healer" named Jesus is nearby, and everyone is setting out to see him. Personally, you don't really get what all the fuss is about, after all, no one in your family is sick or hurt at the moment. But all your friends are going so you do as you are told. As you are leaving the house your mother hands you a small bundle of food. There are several pieces of black barley bread and a couple of the small fish your mother preserves when the catch has been good. You are given strict instructions to tend it well, it has to last you and your brother all day.

When your family sets out from the house there are lots of people in the street, all headed in the same direction. You walk with your family but are quickly drawn by the opportunity to be with your friends and the other pilgrims. As you wander

through the crowd, you begin picking up snippets of conversations about this man Jesus, whom everyone is so keen to see. They say he has done “signs.” That he turned water into wine, and saved a young boy from dying without even looking at him. You hear someone say “perhaps it is the Messiah.” Now this gets your attention! You have been studying Torah and you begin to understand how all these snippets of conversation you have heard are fitting together. Maybe this is going to be more interesting than you expected!

As the crowd nears the shore of the Sea of Galilee you are able to detect the epicenter of the excitement. And being a 9 year old boy you want to have a ring side seat for whatever is going to happen.

So, although you feel a bit guilty because you have your brother’s lunch with you and he is somewhere else in the crowd, and you’re hungry, so you know he must be hungry too, you make your way up close to where this man Jesus is talking to the other men who seem to be his friends or helpers.

As you get close to Jesus (a task made possible only because you are young and small and can weave your way through the adults) you can feel the excitement and the restlessness in the air. Everyone wants to see Jesus, but there is a sense of unease. People are wanting something to happen, but they are also feeling hungry and tired from their journey and unsure if they have done the right thing in making this trip.

When you get up close to Jesus you can hear the conversation happening between Jesus and his friends. They are talking about how all these people will have something to eat. It sounds urgent, like they are afraid fights may start to break out if the hungry are not fed. Jesus wants one of the men to go buy bread but he says it would cost too much. They don't have nearly that much money.

You think about what you have, the bread and fish in your bag. Your brother is depending on that food for his lunch. Your mother told you to be sure your brother got to eat. And you're hungry! But something is tugging at you from inside. There is something about this Jesus guy that is different, and even though you don't understand why, you want to be a part of what is going on here. You want to help Jesus solve this problem. But what you have is so little, and you might get in trouble with your parents, not to mention the fact that you might not get any lunch! You're afraid, but something inside says "trust."

And so you tug on the sleeve of the friend of Jesus who is standing next to you and you open your bag and show him what you have. And the next thing you know, Jesus is saying the blessing you always say at home before meals, and your lunch is getting passed around to all the people. All the people are eating! What just happened here?

What happened was that a small act, a small gift, given in love and trust, was turned into something which has rippled through the last 2000+ years, and which we're still talking about today!

Not many acts of giving have those kinds of consequences, but God's ability to multiply the smallest acts of kindness, the most meager gifts, into something of abundance should not be surprising to us. Evidence of it is all around us, and not just among church folks! In 2015 a coalition to support local business in western Michigan took on a 21-day Kindness Challenge in their community. The idea behind the challenge was that small consistent actions performed over 21 days can create a significant impact in the life of the individual performing the acts.

The challenge involved a daily commitment to an act of kindness. And the entire work team took it on. There were skeptics, these people were not "underworked" to begin with. But everyone agreed to the experiment because there is solid research which shows that practicing kindness has real-world benefits for businesses. In a research report from Harvard Business Review, the author backs up the claim that the single greatest advantage in the modern economy is a happy and engaged workforce.¹ Happiness can raise nearly every

¹ Shawn Achor, "The Happiness Dividend," *Harvard Business Review*, June 23, 2011, <https://hbr.org/2011/06/the-happiness-dividend>.

business and educational outcome.² What these individuals found was that when they paid attention to their own values and worked daily to cultivate them, their sense of connection to the world and their co-workers increased and their lives felt more meaningful and full. They were happier. And that influenced how they interacted with each other and how effective they were in their jobs. They thought of kindness as a business strategy, perhaps without an awareness of where the impulse or desire to do good comes from. We, as people of faith, think of it as the Holy Spirit working within those people, because we realize that God is always working within everyone, always hoping for expression. The group's 21-day kindness challenge was appealing and effective because it played to the divine nature within all humanity. And they just thought it was a good business strategy!

Today's reading from Ephesians includes one of my most favorite passages in the Bible. "Glory to God who's power working within us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to Him from generation to generation and to Christ Jesus our Lord."

What that passage is telling us is that it is God, working through us, that inspires and multiplies our acts of kindness and faith. It's not God working

² Shawn Achor, *The Happiness Advantage: How a Positive Brain Fuels Success in Work and Life*, Reprint edition (New York: Currency, 2018).

independently. God needs us to do God's work. And when we cooperate in that work, when we participate in that work, that's when real change happens, in us and in the world.

Knowing what it is God needs of us, and for that matter, what we need from God, is more than a matter of passive "standing by" to see what comes our way. If we really want to participate with God in creating that which is "infinitely more than we can ask or imagine," it will take some work on our part. It takes discipline. And if I can do a midstream infomercial here, that's what we're going to be covering in our preaching series in August. We're going to be focusing on spiritual disciplines which will connect us with our own divine nature, with the Holy Spirit within us, and with God. Practices of prayer, worship, contemplation and connecting with all creation are ways we can discern the grace of God which is ever before us, just waiting to be recognized, and used, to accomplish "infinitely more than we could ask or imagine."

Our offerings to God, whether they be meager loaves and fish (or pet food!) or major financial donations to a cause we deeply believe in, are evidence of God working within us. And what our scripture readings are telling us this morning is that the nature of our offering is not what matters. God can work with whatever we have to give. We are not called to impoverish ourselves, or deprive our

families of precious time together. But we are called to open our hearts so that God, working through us, can accomplish infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

I am reminded of the final verse of my favorite Christmas hymn.

What can I give him, poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.

If I were a wise man, I would do my part.

What I can I give him. Give my heart.

What I can I give him. Give my heart. That's where it all begins.