

**The Sharing of a Miracle**  
**John 6:1-14**  
**A sermon preached at Bishop Heber Chapel,**  
**Madras Christian College, Tambaram, Chennai, India**  
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I am very grateful to gather with you this morning for worship and prayer-- especially in the light of our experiences yesterday at Tambaram Hospital. I will remember yesterday's visit, and the faces of those patients and families struggling with HIV/AIDS, for a long time.

To me it brought home the urgency of the challenges before us in light of the HIV pandemic; challenges which have been articulated for us through our conference speakers these past few days—

--To be a voice for those who have no voice

--To break the conspiracy of silence surrounding HIV and to speak the truth about HIV prevention and care

--To advocate for justice and empowerment for women

--And to be-- as teachers, pastors, religious workers, students-- the touch of God's compassion and care for those forgotten, stigmatized and rejected by the world.

Dr. Sushi Samuel, in her remarks yesterday at the conference, articulated the challenge very well. "(As educators) we are not called just to share information," she said, "but to affect transformation in the lives of others. We are called to embody a theology of life and not death."

To be the leaven for transformation and hope in the face of the HIV pandemic is a daunting task to say the least. Last night around the dinner table, several people in our group expressed how easy it is to feel insignificant and overwhelmed in the face of a task so large.

I confess that's how I felt too after our experiences at the hospital yesterday. When dinner was over, I went back to my hotel room with a heavy heart. I began to give thought and prayer to what needed to be said in our worship today, this being last day of the National HIV/AIDS training event here at Madras Christian College. And the text that came to my mind was the story of the feeding of the 5000.

The story of the feeding of the 5000 occurs in all four of the gospels. But only John mentions the little boy. The text says that it was Andrew who first saw him, "Lord, there is a boy here with five loaves and two fishes, but what is that among so many?"

As a preacher whose stock in trade is looking for practical examples of how God works in the world, I'm glad the boy is included in John's version of the story. Because for me, this little kid just kind of jumps off the page and says: "Hey! If you want an example of how God's grace works in the world, you might want to look in my direction."

You probably remember the context for this story. The crowd that's been following Jesus is in an emotional state. News of Jesus' healing power has gone around the countryside, and the crowd was now pressing in upon him, because, as the gospel writers tell us, they wanted to see a miracle.

But Jesus, in need of some time to rest and reflect, decides instead to withdraw across the Sea of Galilee, presumably to find solitude in the hills on the other side. The crowd watches him go, and as soon as they can determine where his boat is going to land, they set off ---a great swarm of people on a long hike around the lake to intercept Jesus and the disciples when they come to shore.

So just when Jesus wanted to have some alone time for prayer and renewal, he instead finds himself surrounded again by this needy crowd. And now not only are many sick, but they are also tired, and footsore, and hungry. The story suggests that Jesus recognized the need instantly, which is not surprising. But what is surprising is his response. When faced with a great crowd in crisis, Jesus' response is to immediately turn to his disciples and to enlist them in the finding of an answer. John says he looked at the twelve and asked: "Where are we to buy bread to feed these people?"

Luke in his version, records that Jesus just told the disciples point blank: "You feed them." And Philip, who is one of my favorite disciples because he is so pragmatic and practical in what he says-- Philip looks out at the crowd, and with the eye of a business manager, he brings the bad news: "Master, six months wages for all of us would not give them even a crumb a piece."

John hints that there may have been a kind of twinkle in Jesus' eye when he told the disciples to feed the crowd, because John adds the little editorial comment, "He knew what he meant to do." But, my question today is exactly that: What did Jesus mean to do here? What does Jesus mean to do in situations where a great mass of people are sick, and needy and hurt and hungry? What does Jesus mean to do when he looks out on a great mass of people for whom life is collapsing and falling apart...people who feel alienated from help, from their best self and from God? What does Jesus mean to do when people are lying in hospital cots in the Tambaram hospital just a few kilometers away from here, many of them dying alone of HIV/AIDS, and a solution needs to be found?

In this gospel story—on the one hand we have a mass of people crying out for help and wholeness --and on the other side of the equation we have Jesus, the rescuing, life-giving goodness of God come to earth in human form. And it's worth asking; "How does God allow that goodness, that grace, to go into action?" It doesn't come in the flipping of a switch, some magical incantation or a snap of the fingers.

Not according to the gospel writers. They all point us in a very different and much less flashy direction. According to them, this healing goodness comes through people...regular, ordinary people who have both strengths and flaws, good intentions and imperfections, but whom God enlists to give what they have, and to trust that it will be blessed and multiplied.

Nothing is clearer to me in the witness of scripture than the truth that God has the power to take a little and make it a lot. Nothing is clearer than the truth that God again and again calls to ordinary people in times of need and invites them to do what they can—and then multiplies and blesses their efforts with his power.

You can find it on almost every page of the biblical witness. Think of Moses, on the run in the wilderness, having killed a taskmaster in Pharaoh's house. And God shows up and says, "Moses, I need you to help me deliver people from a pandemic of oppression back in Egypt. And Moses says, "Not me. I'm not the one for that. I'm not leadership material, and I've got a speech impediment to boot. There's got to be someone else to do that."

Turn over a few pages in your bible and there is God once again calling, this time to Jeremiah, and saying, "I need you to be my voice, and speak the truth in love to my people. People are dying because no one will speak the truth to them, and you're the one to be my voice." And of course Jeremiah's response is: "You've got the wrong guy. I'm just a kid. No one would listen to me. 'Lord, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.'"

Turn over a few pages more, and you can eavesdrop on God speaking to Isaiah, who has landed a cushy job in the royal household as a friend of the king. "Isaiah", God says, "I need you to use your influence to affect justice in a land that has forgotten the widows and neglected the orphan. I need you to be a voice for the voiceless...and to call people to care for those left behind." And of course, Isaiah says, "You must be kidding. I'm the wrong man for the job. 'Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.' I'm not spiritual enough to do that."

You see what I mean? There is this litany in scripture, rehearsed over and over again, in which we find God meeting very ordinary folks in their insecurity and their fear of inadequacy and helping them rise to the occasion and accomplish something great—something worth giving their lives to. There's a name for this: It's called "synergy", which I know is a term used more in science than it is religion. But it's a great word.

Synergy literally means "working together". Specifically it means two entities working to make something happen that would not be done by either one of them alone. And synergy is the central theme of the loaves and fishes story. It's also, I humbly submit to you today, at the heart of our efforts as we seek to be God's hands and feet to respond to a problem as large as HIV/AIDS.

It's the church's way of saying, "If we will step out of our comfort zones and give up our five loaves and two fish, then God will make us the strong leaders we could never be on our own" If we will give God our loaves and fish and God will make us voices of tolerance, care, and justice that we could never be without him.

I believe that is what God is asking of us now, as we will soon go back to our workplaces. I believe that God is not nearly as interested in our *ability* as in our *availability*, and that awareness

is critical if we are to stay strong in the work we have to do. It is so easy to think that the problem is too large and that we won't make a difference.

There is an American author named Robert Fulghum, who in one of his books tells a story about visiting the circus when he was a boy. Fulghum loved elephants, and so he made a beeline for the tent where the elephants were kept. As he looked at the animals, he noticed that each one had a large rope tied around their necks. But to his alarm, he saw that the other end of the rope was unsecured, just left to dangle on the ground.

Thinking the circus staff had forgotten to secure the animals, he anxiously found the man in charge. "Sir, these elephants aren't tied up." The keeper replied, "It's ok. We used to secure the ropes, but over time we found it wasn't necessary. The elephants just think they are tied up and that's all that really matters. As long as they believe their tied, they never try to go anywhere." And that same kind of passive inertia can easily happen in any life. It can happen especially when we find ourselves called to give time and energy to a cause that is as daunting as the HIV pandemic. If we assume our hands are tied, that we are defeated, then in all likelihood we won't try to go much of anywhere.

But I have to believe that for the early church, the loaves and fishes story served as an antidote to that sort of despair...that posture of being paralyzed by low expectation.

We will never know for sure how the boy's five loaves and two fish became enough for the crowd that day. Interestingly enough, the biblical writers don't concern themselves with that question. Not a word is said about a moment of transubstantiation or anything like that. The writers say only that the boy's gift was shared and that enough was produced to respond to all who were there with plenty to spare.

But notice the clear implication that is embedded in this text. The implication is that if the boy held back that day, there would have been no miracle. If I hold back when I am asked to speak up for those who have no voice--If I hold back when I am asked break the conspiracy of silence and to tell the truth about HIV transmission and prevention; if I hold back and you hold back and the whole religious community holds back when we are called to stand against bigotry and stigmatization and the marginalization of those living with HIV, then the channels of grace are blocked. That's the bad news.

But good news is that the opposite is also true! If each one of us catches the vision; if we each begin to hear the cries of those patients in Tambaram as coming from the lips of Christ himself--—If each one of us does our part, however large or small—then we open ourselves to the synergetic power of a God who can take a mustard seed of faithfulness and turn it into the largest of trees.

So I want to close today by asking you a question. How many loaves do you have to give in this work? How many fish? The number you come up with---few or many---isn't as important as your willingness to give them up; to entrust them to God, and to let God be God in the making of a miracle.

God, you see, depends on you, as he once depended on a little boy.

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