

SERMON
June 23, 2019

Have you ever experienced this? You've taken on a new challenge and felt pride that you conquered it; and then you realize that your challenge was just a baby-step. You were just at "level one."

I think that's how Jesus' disciples felt in today's Gospel reading. Like any good leader, Jesus challenged his disciples to put their learning into practice. Just before the miraculous feeding of the 5,000, Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs into the surrounding country. He had given them the power and the authority to heal diseases, cast out demons and preach the good news of the Kingdom of God. Can you imagine how excited they were to be given this opportunity?

When they returned they were excited about what they had accomplished. They wanted to tell Jesus about their experiences. So he took them to a remote place near Bethsaida so they could have some privacy and rest (Luke 9:10-11). But the crowds followed them there. An enormous crowd. There would be no rest for the weary that day.

Jesus welcomed the crowds. He began telling them of the Kingdom of God and healing their illnesses. As the day wore on, Jesus' disciples asked him to send the people away—it was getting late. It was near to the time for the evening meal. The disciples may have been concerned that a hungry crowd of this size would turn ugly. They were obviously not on the same page as Jesus. At this point Jesus gave his disciples a challenge: "**You** give them something to eat."

Whoa . . . that's a pretty big challenge—feed 5, 000 men plus an unknown number of women and children. That's a tall order. In their minds it was an impossible order. It would require the world's largest commercial kitchen to prepare a meal for such a mob. But, this is Jesus we're talking about. My guess is that he wanted to teach his disciples a lesson in faith. Consider this: they'd just returned from a journey where they had cast out demons, healed diseases and

proclaimed the Kingdom of God. They were feeling pretty good about themselves. Was Jesus saying to them, “Nice job, men— that was *Level One*”?

Needless to say, the disciples protested: “*We only have five loaves of bread and two fish— unless we go buy food for all this crowd.*” Actually buying food for that size crowd was not really an option. Costco was nowhere in the area. Wal-Mart had not yet gone into the grocery business in that part of Judea. So what were they to do? It was a challenge, a challenge they were not prepared for.

Well, there are challenges... and there are challenges. Jesus had already given his disciples the power and the authority to do ministry. When he invited the crowd to sit down, and he blessed the bread and fish, he was teaching his disciples a new *perspective* on ministry. Jesus was teaching them to always be ready to seize a God-moment when it presents itself.

If God presents you with a challenge, grab hold and run with it. The disciples were ready to send the crowd home—“We’re tired. They’re hungry. Let’s close up shop and start again tomorrow.” Jesus knew he needed to capture this particular moment when the people were ready to hear about God. They were ready to see God work. So he healed their diseases and told them about the kingdom and when the time was right, he did the most spectacular miracle of all—he multiplied the loaves and fishes and fed this enormous crowd. Jesus seized every opportunity to share God’s message and love with the world. You never see Jesus urging his disciples to hurry because they needed to get somewhere by a certain time. He knew what had to be done and gave himself plenty of time. He never lost focus and embraced interruptions that fit into his purpose.

Jesus was a rare individual—he was a man on a mission, yet always had time for people in need. In the common world we inhabit, people in a hurry rarely have time for others. “Don’t bother me, can’t you see I’m busy.” “Later, I’m in too much of a hurry now.” “Surely you don’t expect an important person like me to waste time on trivia!” They ignore others, or brush past them, or push them aside, or trample over them in their rush to fulfill their immediate goal. Jesus was

different. Very different. This becomes more obvious towards the end of his ministry. As the mounting pressure to complete his crucial goal at Jerusalem became acute, he still seemed to have time for the lonely, the sick, the desperate and the outcaste. He was pressed to complete his mission, yet, as he made his way through towns and villages he still made space for seekers who sincerely needed him. At the end of Jesus' life on earth, he told his Father that he had finished what he had come to do. He could be completely satisfied that his life, though short, was well-lived and there was nothing left undone. Jesus was not in a hurry because he saw every moment as a potential God-moment. If we were to look at every moment this way, how many opportunities would we have to do great things for God!

Another thing Jesus is teaching us in this passage is always to be ready to meet a need. The need in this case was the people's hunger— both physical and spiritual. It's remarkable as you read the New Testament how attuned to people's needs Jesus was. We can do the same as Jesus. Our compassionate service can grow people's faith, and the church can be built-up on that faith. But first, we have to commit to meeting people's needs. Winston Churchill once said: "To every [person] there comes in his lifetime that special moment when he is figuratively tapped on the shoulder and offered a chance to do a very special thing, unique to him and fitted to his talents. What a tragedy if that moment finds him unprepared or unqualified for the work which would be his finest hour." When is our finest hour? Any moment when we are sharing God's love through words or actions.

But there is a third principle Jesus is teaching us in the feeding of the 5,000. It is that if you're ready to seize a God-moment and ready to meet a need, then God will provide everything you need to be an effective witness for him. South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu often paraphrases the words of Augustine of Hippo on the mission and work of the church—"By himself, God won't; by ourselves, we can't; but together with God, we can!" "By himself, God won't; by ourselves, we can't; but together with God, we can!"

As I've threatened... let's take a look at what this Interim process is all about—As your Interim Minister my role is much more than “pulpit supply “ while you're finding a new pastor. Church life must go on— meetings, boards, projects, ministry! But while this is happening you have to prepare a parish profile that accurately describes who you are and what you are looking for in a minister. Sure, we'd all like to hear Children's Sermons and see kids off to Sunday School or VBS. But what are our chances of that happening? Unless us retired folk start having more children, demographics aren't going to change. So, we shouldn't hold out the prospect of youth ministry to attract potential candidates. But ministry to Seniors and Adult Education are a whole different matter!

Likewise clergy compensation—Twenty-five...thirty years ago, the minister was male; his spouse was a schoolteacher or librarian. *His* calling provided housing— a parsonage—and moderate income; his spouse provided the health insurance, Social Security and pension. Today, the minister may be a female or single, and there's a housing allowance since the church sold off the parsonage or turned it into a parking lot. The minister's partner may have a well-paying job and Social Security, but no free benefits, so churches have started to provide health insurance. Which means that clergy compensation packages have risen, or the minister is something other than full-time or is bi-vocational or retired. In other words, the pool of candidates is sharply reduced. And then there are other issues—

One of the UCC church groups I'm active with is working with a minister who was called to a church a little over two years ago. Now that the “Clergy Honeymoon” is over she is being criticized for being “too political” despite the fact that the church profile said they wanted a minister who is outspoken on social justice issues. Are we being fully forthright and honest in who we are and what we are looking for? It's not a question of being nice or being politically correct, it's about being honest and transparent about what you really are. Part of my role as Interim is to “smoke you out” on these sorts of things. It may cause you to squirm and feel pained; I'm not here to harm you, but to reinvigorate you.

Be ready any time a God-moment presents itself. If you see a need that you can fill, even if you feel you are inadequate for the task, remember you are not alone. If God has called you to a task, God will be with you and will always give you what you need to fulfill that task.