

JESUS AND HIS FOLLOWERS

March 04, 2012

By Pastor Stan

Luke 9:10-17

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SERMON SERIES: WALKING WITH JESUS: STORIES ABOUT JESUS FROM THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

SERMON TITLE: "JESUS AND HIS FOLLOWERS"

SERMON TOPIC: DISCIPLESHIP

SCRIPTURE TEXTS: LUKE 9:10-17 / P. 730

DATE: MARCH 4, 2012

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INTRO.

-- My father was in the Army Corps of Engineers during World War II. The Corps' unofficial slogan in those years was "The difficult we do immediately. The impossible takes a little longer." In today's story from Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Luke the Disciples could use some help from the Army Corps of Engineers because Jesus gives them an assignment to do the impossible. Actually, in this case not even the Engineer Corps would help because Jesus wants this assignment done immediately.

I. THE STORY (VV. 10-17)

-- When verse 9 says that the Disciples returned and reported to Jesus what they had done, it's referring to what is recorded in the first nine verses. Jesus has bestowed on the Disciples His divine authority to cast out demons and to heal diseases and has then sent them out in pairs to travel throughout the nation of Israel to preach about the coming of the Kingdom of God in the person and ministry of Jesus. The Disciples are now returning to Jesus to report excitedly about their healing and preaching successes.

-- Desiring to have some down-time alone with the Disciples, Jesus takes them on a get-away retreat to Bethsaida, a small village on the remote, northeastern shores of the Sea of Galilee. Somehow the word gets out about their destination and an enormous crowd of several thousand people gathers at Bethsaida. Jesus could have reacted with an annoyance that would have been understandable. Instead, He welcomes those who have followed Him and the Disciples, and He promptly begins to teach them more about the Kingdom of God and to heal those who were diseased. And it isn't just a few minutes of token ministry. Jesus spends the entire afternoon on this unscheduled event.

-- Finally, when the sun starts to set, the Disciples come to Jesus who has obviously lost track of the time and isn't paying attention to how late it is. They remind Jesus that they're in a remote location and tell Jesus that it's time to call it quits and to send the big crowd of people away so that they can find food and lodging before it gets dark.

It's a thoroughly reasonable suggestion, but Jesus responds to it with a shockingly unreasonable command:

v. 13a "He replied, 'You give them something to eat.'"

The Disciples reply, "We have only five loaves of bread and two fish - unless we go and buy food for all this crowd."

-- Essentially the Disciples are saying, "There's no way we can do that. We've already checked, and the only food we can find is 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. The only way we could feed them is to go and buy something." What the Disciples don't say is something that is so obvious that it goes without saying: they don't have that kind of money. Luke notes that the crowd numbered in the thousands - 5,000 men plus women and children, making a total of probably 10,000 to 15,000. In other words, it's obvious that there is no way for the Disciples to feed that multitude.

-- Except, there was.

There was a resource that the Disciples had completely disregarded, and He was sitting right in front of them.

-- Look at verses 1 and 4.

vv. 1, 4

The Disciples had access to the authority and power of Jesus Himself. Indeed, they had just returned from a mission in which they had performed miraculous healings through the power that Jesus had bestowed on them, but they somehow didn't even think about Jesus' authority and power as a resource. His power, of

course, was more than enough. Jesus took the 5 loaves and 2 fish and fed the thousands.

II. THE LESSONS

-- Of all the miracles performed by Jesus, this is the only one recorded in all four Gospels, a fact that points to its significance. As we consider what it is that God wants to teach us in this story, I think that we need to start by asking a question: why does Jesus tell the Disciples to feed the crowd, something that is clearly impossible for them to do? When the Disciples come to Jesus telling Him to send the crowd away to get something to eat, why doesn't Jesus just tell them that He is going to miraculously provide the food? Why deliberately put the Disciples in an impossible situation and give them an impossible assignment?

-- Let me suggest at least three reasons.

A. JESUS PUTS THE DISCIPLES IN THIS "IMPOSSIBLE" SITUATION BECAUSE HE WANTS TO GIVE THEM A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF HOW TO DEPEND ON HIS ABILITY TO PROVIDE.

-- In verses 1-9 Jesus sent the Disciples out to travel around preaching the Gospel and instructed them not to take any provisions with them - no food, no money, not even a bag to carry anything in. They were to depend on the Lord to provide for their needs through people that they would meet along the way, and that was exactly what happened. Trusting God to provide in that way, of course, required a measure of faith, but it was what you might call a "reasonable" kind of faith - even from a human perspective you could see how God could move people to give food and lodging to Jesus' Disciples. But to feed over 5,000 people with just 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish, well that requires a whole new level of faith - from a human perspective you can't see how that is possible.

Ephesians 3:20a says that God "is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think…"

So in putting the Disciples in this seemingly impossible situation Jesus is able to teach them new lessons about faith and can train them to trust Him in new and greater ways. And God may do that with us as well. He can put us in situations that seem impossible in order to refine and deepen our faith and to teach us that He can make a way even when there seems to be no way. He can bring us up against the Red Sea so that He can open a way that no one else could open.

B. JESUS PUTS THE DISCIPLES IN THIS "IMPOSSIBLE" SITUATION BECAUSE HE WANTS TO EXPAND THE PERSPECTIVE FROM WHICH THEY LOOK AT LIFE.

-- The Disciples look at this as an impossible situation because they are looking at it from a humanistic, materialistic perspective - from the perspective of fish and bread and money. There are over 5,000 people to feed, and the Disciples only have 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish and no money. It just doesn't add up. Mathematically, it's an impossible situation.

So often in the Church we're just like those Disciples. We decide whether we can do something or not based on the material resources we have. We automatically decide that we can't do something because we don't have enough money or people. What God wants to teach us in this story is that our most important resource is always Christ, who possesses all authority and power. Whatever Jesus wants us to do He can provide all that is needed to do it. Nothing is impossible for Him.

C. JESUS PUTS THE DISCIPLES IN THIS "IMPOSSIBLE" SITUATION BECAUSE HE WANTS THEM TO KNOW THAT HE IS NOT LIMITED BY THEIR NATURAL RESOURCES, THAT HE CAN DO THROUGH THEM WHAT THEY COULD NEVER DREAM OF DOING ON THEIR OWN.

-- A theme that we see throughout the Bible is God's putting people in situations where they are forced to realize the utter impossibility of their own natural resources and to rely on His authority and power.

-- For example, God promised to make Abraham the father of a great nation. But when Abraham was 99 and Sarah was 89 they were still childless. In fact, they laughed when God sent an angel to tell them that they would have child a year later. It was obvious that they couldn't have children at that age. But a year later, when Abraham was 100 and Sarah, who had been barren all her life, was 90, Isaac was born.

Or consider the OT character named Gideon. Israel had been invaded and conquered by an enemy named the Midianites, and God called Gideon to lead a rebellion that would free Israel. Gideon is full of excuses but eventually he gathers an army of 32,000. Even though Gideon's army is badly outnumbered they are willing to fight, believing that with God's help they can win. But God instructs Gideon to reduce the size of the army until there are just 300 left, and then God sends Gideon out to wage war with the Midianites. With an army of 32,000 Israel could be tempted to rely on their own skill and courage, but with only 300 there was no mistaking that the only way to win would be to rely on God.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in

weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 10 That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong

CONCLUSION

In Experiencing God author Henry Blackaby says that theologically and doctrinally we believe in the power of God, but when it comes to what we actually do, we tend to operate as if God were a passive bystander, watching to see what we're going to do and if we get into trouble we can ask Him to help us out. Blackaby points out that there are 2 big problems with this way of operating:

(1) First, God is the one who is on mission in this world. He's already at work, and He's able to do whatever He purposes, and it's our job to find out where He's at work and what He wants us to do and for us to get on board with Him.

(2) Secondly, we tend to plan and set goals in light of the resources that we possess - how much money we have and how many workers there are. But when God sets a goal it always exceeds our material resources - it's always something we can't attain without Him. The Bible says that without faith it's impossible to please God. So if we attempt something that we know we can do on our own, without faith, and ask God to bless it, then we're asking Him to bless something not pleasing to Him. Blackaby's contention is that when God gives us a vision it will have a God-sized dimension to it.

Many of us remember the 1989 opening of the Berlin Wall that separated East and West Berlin, but I doubt that most of us know the real story behind that historic event: the story of the Christians in communistic East Germany. For 40 years the Christians in East Germany were oppressed and persecuted in almost every conceivable way. They had no political or economic strength. For them to make an impact on their society was like trying to feed a crowd of thousands with 5 loaves and 2 fish. So they had to rely on the power of God.

In 1982 believers in East Germany started what they called "Peace Services." They met together every Monday evening praying for peace and reconciliation of East and West Berlin and East and West Germany. At first they just met in small groups in homes, but the movement grew more and more and they started filling larger and larger churches with people praying and crying out to God.

In October of 1989 fifty thousand believers were gathering for prayer every Monday night in Leipzig (a city about 90 miles from Berlin). Then one Monday night the Holy Spirit led them to move out of the churches to demonstrate and pray peacefully in the streets. Their numbers grew to 300,000. The East German army, known for its ruthlessness, was there in force, equipped with tear gas, guns and tanks. But amazingly the army just stood by and watched as 300,000 stood in the streets praying for God to bring peace and reconciliation. The next week the Berlin wall was opened.

Do you think that God wants to use North Center to make an impact on our community? I do. With our resources it's as impossible as feeding 5,000 with 5 loaves and 2 fish.