

A third way to approach problems

Exodus 16:1-8, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, Mark 6:35-44

Sometimes, we feel that there are great needs, but we are powerless in our ability to solve them. Today's global economic crisis is a perfect example of such a situation. But these types of problems can be seen everywhere and every day. In today's scripture reading, we are faced with a crowd of five thousand that needs to be fed, but the resources available are absolutely deficient to meet the demands. However, Jesus shows his disciples, and us, a different way to approach and solve big problems.

Jesus and His disciples had been constantly teaching and caring for people, and were now tired. Because so many people were coming and going, they didn't even have a chance to eat. So Jesus said to His disciples, "Now it's time to have a rest by ourselves. Let's go across the Sea of Galilee to find a quiet place." So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw them leaving recognized them, and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them.

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them again many things. By this time it was late in the day. Jesus started to think about how to feed the crowd. The disciples guessed what Jesus might be thinking, and said to Him, "This is a remote place. It is already very late. Send them away so they can go the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat."

The words "send them away" are not unfamiliar to us. Let's not take responsibility for them! They are not our guests! The disciples may have convinced themselves that this crowd that had followed them was not their responsibility. Let them buy their own bread in the villages! But the disciples also knew that there was small chance that these thousands of people could do that.

But Jesus answered them, "You give them something to eat." This demanding, "You give them something to eat!" must have been a cultural shock for the disciples. I'm sure we are all familiar with the concept of "going Dutch." At a "Dutch lunch," everyone at the table pays for his or her own meal. Behind this is the idea that whatever you eat is your own responsibility. In the country where I grew up, we do not "go Dutch." Instead there is a culture of "whatever I have, I will share with my friends." In that culture, the "Dutch lunch" is a cultural shock.

You may want to remember this if I ever ask you, "Shall we go have lunch somewhere?" This means that I intend to treat you to lunch. Keep that in mind, and I will expect your response to be "OK, let's go!"

When Jesus suggested, "You give them something to eat," the disciples were looking for external resources as the solution. They replied, "Should we go and buy two

hundred Denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat? Two hundred Denarii are worth eight months of a man wages!"

The disciples were looking in the wrong direction! Jesus redirected them, saying: "Go and see how many loaves you have." After they went to see, they returned and reported, "Five and two fishes."

Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundred and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, He gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then He gave them to His disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of the bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

About a hundred years ago, an old gentleman was traveling alone on a train in France. A young man, sitting next to him, watched the old man take out his Bible and begin to read. After a while, the young man decided to strike up a conversation, and asked, "What are you reading?" The old man replied, "I am reading from the sixth Chapter of John in the New Testament."

"What does it say?" the young man asked. "Oh, it's the story of the miracle of the loaves and fishes." The old man described: "There was a vast crowd that had followed Jesus because of the signs he was performing for the sick, and Jesus preached to the crowd until it was dark. They were hungry, and with only five barley loaves and a couple of dried fish, Jesus fed the entire crowd of 5,000. And the leftovers filled twelve baskets."

Scornfully and cynically, the young man said, "Surely you don't believe that!" But the older man answered, "Oh, Yes I do." Then the young said to him, "Well, I can see that you have been brainwashed by ancient superstitions. Not me! That could never happened to me because, you see, I am a scientist. The only thing I trust and believe in is what can be proven scientifically. The story you have read defies the laws of science, and therefore I can't accept it. Give me facts, provable facts. As a man of science, I have no faith in miracles. But, of course, I can't expect someone like you to understand that."

At that point, the train began to slow down. "Here is my station," said the young man as he rose from his seat. "It was nice talking to you, Mr. - Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't get your name." With that, the older man reached into pocket and pulled out his business card. He handed it to the younger man.

The younger man looked at it. Imagine his surprise; the name on the card was Louis Pasteur! Louis Pasteur, of course, was a famous French chemist and microbiologist. He developed the first vaccine for rabies, and even today, we drink Pasteurized milk. The young man must have been embarrassed and mortified, carelessly boasting of himself as a scientist in front of Louis Pasteur. Surely, Louis Pasteur, as a scientist,

knew the value of the scientific method but also its limitations. He understood that the scientific method is not the only road to truth.

Listening to the dialogue between Jesus and His disciples in today's scripture reading, I found three different approaches to a single problem.

First, the disciples' immediate suggestion was: let's send them out and let them take care of themselves. We don't have to be responsible for them, or get involved in their problems. This is the easiest, most painless way, to solve the problem. Let them pay their own expenses. While "going Dutch" is reasonable, comfortable, and fair for everybody, it's not the right solution for all occasions. The attempt to escape from responsibility is behind many spiritual diseases in our society. Escape from responsibility is only a diversion, and not a solution to the fundamental problem.

In the disciples' second attempt, they started to calculate the expense. When Jesus told them, "You give them something to eat," the disciples looked at the size of the crowd and the cost of bread, and quickly came up with an estimate of eight months of wages. We are accustomed to solving problems through money, but monetary calculation is not the only way to approach a problem. If we are intent on finding a financial solution, but find that we don't have the resources, we give up on the problem. The disciples tried to turn to external, financial resources, but that was still not the right way to approach the problem.

The third, and the real solution, is to discover and use the resources that are within us. In every generation there are these two continuing classes of people and attitudes; those who are looking for something from without and those who are looking within.

Jesus was not expecting the disciples to have everything at hand to meet the crowd's needs. Rather, he wanted to see them express a positive and sacrificial attitude of faith to approach the problem. Note the contrast between the disciples and Jesus. They looked entirely to the responsibilities outside the situation. Jesus said that the emergency could be met within the situation with their own resources and faith.

The obstacle to finding and using our internal resources is our mind and spirit. Albert Einstein once said that "it is easier to denature plutonium than it is to denature the evil spirit of man." Most economists agree that the source of the economic crisis today is the fear and greed within our minds.

Schindler's List is a movie that both moved and impressed me. It tells the true story of Oskar Schindler, a German businessman and factory owner. He started out trying to make his fortune during the Second World War by exploiting cheap Jewish labor. But as he witnesses the horror of the Holocaust, he uses his factory to save over 1000 Polish Jews from almost certain death.

By the time the war was over, Schindler was penniless, as he spent much his fortune bribing Nazi officials. At the end of the movie, Schindler dismisses the Nazi guards and bids farewell to his workers, as he prepares to flee the Soviet Red Army. The workers give him a letter explaining that he is not a criminal to them, and present him with a ring engraved with the Talmudic quotation, "He who saves the life of one man, saves the world entire."

The Jewish workers who were saved from death wanted to give Schindler something as a gift. But they came to the camp with no possessions, with just their barely clothed bodies. In spite of this, they were able to present their rescuer with a gold ring. I still remember the scene in the movie when the workers were making the ring. First, an old woman takes a tooth with a gold filling from her mouth, and offers to make a gold ring from it. Then, one by one, others come forward, each with a tooth.

They collected small bits of gold from their mouths, melted it, molded it, and formed a gold ring. They then engraved this ring with the words: "He who saves the life of one, saves the world entire." And they gave this ring as a token of love to Schindler, who saved their lives. That is spirit of sacrifice which Jesus used to multiply five loaves and two fish to feed the five thousand people. I believe that the miracle of Jesus was not only a material transformation, but more important, a spiritual transformation.

Here is the word of God spoken through the mouth of Paul: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Corinthians 1:18)

We are those who believe the cross of Christ and the spirit of the cross. For us, everything is possible in the cross of Christ and the spirit.

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28) Jesus it is who invites, not "the wise and learned", but "the weary and burdened."

Don't try to get away from your burden. Rather, take your yoke of responsibility for others. Don't find your way to solve problems from without, but try to find your way within your self. Most importantly, offer yourself to the Lord, in God's hand your problems will be transformed into easy and light. This is the way, the third way to approach problems. Where problems are the solutions are also.