

July 19 2009

Where there is a problem, there is also the solution

Mark 6: 35-42

Every once in a while, we run into problems that we cannot solve. The problem may seem so big that we are immediately dismayed. We may try to avoid the problem, or wish there was a place where problems didn't exist. But that is not a solution. It's not possible to find a place where problems don't exist.

One day, a preacher stood in front of the pulpit and said to his congregation: "I have two pieces of news for you: one is good news and the other is bad news. The good news is that we have more than enough money to pay off the church's debts." The congregation exclaimed "Hallelujah!" and "Amen!" Then the preacher added: "And the bad news is that this money is still in your pocket." Then the congregation was quiet.

My sermon today is titled "Where there is a problem, there is also the solution." This morning, I'd like to share the good news of the Lord, reflecting on the Gospel of Mark 6: 35-42.

Today's scripture tells the story of the feeding of the five thousand. In this story, in today's terms, Jesus solved a five-thousand dollar problem with just one dollar. What an amazing story it is! This event must have made a deep impression on the disciples. It is the only miracle, other than the Resurrection, that is recorded in all four Gospels. The feeding of the five thousand is a very interesting story, but also a difficult one to accept and to apply as a matter of faith to our lives.

Let me ask you all a question, "Do you believe that Jesus performed the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand?" If you answered "Yes," let me ask you further: What does it mean that you believe this miracle? Do you believe that something similar could happen to you? If not, then your believe is not complete.

Let's recall the story. Jesus and his disciples had retreated to a private area along the Sea of Galilee to reflect and pray, but the people had followed them. When Jesus saw a great crowd he had compassion for them, and he began to teach them many things late into the day. Then his disciples came to Jesus and said, "It is very late and this is deserted place; let's send them away so that they may go and buy something for themselves." The disciples' proposal seemed very reasonable. But Jesus thought differently. He told them instead: "You give them something to eat."

The disciples wanted to escape from the problem, and proposed that the people find a solution their own way. But Jesus did not accept this, and rather charged the disciples to find a solution among them. “You provide food for them!”

One of the great things about Jesus was that he never looked on needy human beings as a nuisance. Instead, out of deep compassion, he rearranged his plans and worked with these interruptions creatively and meaningfully. Now, his disciples were more like we are. They were less patient and less gracious. They thought, “Why can’t they just leave us alone?”

When Jesus told his disciples to give the people something to eat, the disciples tried to find a solution. They brought five barley loaves and two dried fishes to the Lord. The Lord took the bread and the fish, gave thanks to God, and passed them out to be shared by the five thousand. The people all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve baskets full of leftovers.

But how could that happen? There are three possible ways of understanding this miracle of Jesus.

First, perhaps Jesus performed the miracle using supernatural powers, breaking the natural law. Maybe Jesus called angels to bring bread and fishes from somewhere, so that the five thousand people could all be fed. Or maybe he ordered stones to become loaves of bread, and branches to turn to fish. Do you think this is what happened? I don’t think so. Jesus didn’t do anything this way in the Bible. Rather, when Jesus was told to use supernatural powers by the devil, he refused. During his temptation in the desert, the devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” Jesus had supernatural powers, but he did not use his powers to break natural law.

He transformed pure water to tasty wine for the wedding in Cana, transformed a dead body to a living body, the sick to the healthy, and sinners to righteous people. But he did not break the natural law in doing these things. To change stone to bread would break a law of nature. And also, according to the natural law, five loaves of bread and two dried fishes cannot sufficiently feed five thousand people. What happened was not due to supernatural powers nor to natural law.

Don’t believe anyone who insists that material transformation is possible by prayer.

Second possibility: Then did Jesus use some sort of magic that we don’t know? In a magic show, we are tempted to believe impossible things that we think we see. But magic is not real, but only an illusion, an entertainment.

According to the Acts 8, there is a story about a magician named Simon. He practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. All the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, “This man has divine powers!” They followed him because he had amazed them for so long with his magic.

But when Philip, a disciple of Jesus, appeared and preached the good news, many people in Samaria came to believe in Jesus and were baptized, including Simon. Simon saw that when the disciples of Jesus prayed for the people, and laid their hands on them, they received the Holy Spirit. So he offered money to the disciples and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

But Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money!" Simon knew that the magic he performed was neither real and nor spiritual. Jesus's miracle was not a magic act. Don't believe in magical illusions. And don't believe that the Holy Spirit is a magical power. Healing is not magic but the delivering from sickness to wholeness.

Finally, then, what exactly happened during this miracle? I cannot say for certain, but I believe it was neither a natural accident nor a magical act. It was a spiritual happening. Let's look at this miracle through the perspective of spiritual eyes. A human being is not only physical being but also spiritual being. Natural law cannot change a person spiritually. Only the Holy Spirit can change the human heart.

Nathanael was introduced to Jesus by his friend Philip. Philip approached him one day and said, "I met the man who was introduced by the Law of Moses and was told by the prophets in the Old Testament. His name is Jesus, a son of carpenter, Joseph, of Nazareth." But Nathanael was pessimistic after hearing Philip's introduction of Jesus, saying: "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" "Come and see!" said Philip. So a reluctant Nathanael came to see Jesus.

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false." "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." Then Jesus blessed him by saying, "You shall see greater things than that, I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." Then, the pessimistic Nathanael committed himself, to give his whole life right away and to follow Jesus. Being recognized by God is the moment of transformation.

Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, was a rich but lonely man. One day Jesus entered Jericho where Zacchaeus lived and was passing through. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a fig tree to see him. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." And he came down at once and welcomed Jesus gladly into his home.

At the table, Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

What made Zacchaeus change his mind so rapidly? I believe that Zacchaeus' heart was changed when he realized that he was recognized by Jesus. Spiritual power changes the human heart, which can then lead to material change.

The human being is a powerful resource. According to the Gospel of John, there was a boy who offered his entire lunch basket which contained five barley loaves and two dried fishes to the Lord, to be used to feed the hungry people. The boy trusted Jesus to take his little and turn it into plenty.

Barley bread, by the way, was the food of the very poor in Biblical times. Barley was the cheapest grain, often fed to animals, not people. The two fish were probably small pickled fish, something to help moisten the dry barley bread. In those days, with no refrigeration, fresh fish would have been a luxury. A small boy from a poor family would not have fresh fish in his lunch basket. But nevertheless, meager as it was, the little boy brought what he had to Jesus, and our Lord used it. And how he used it!

William Barclay, in his book *The Gospel of John*, put it like this:

“There was the boy. He had not much to offer but out of what he had. Jesus found the materials of a miracle. There would have been one great and shining deed fewer in history if the boy had... withheld his loaves and fishes.” The point is that Jesus can use what we bring him. Even if it isn't much, he can use it.

It is possible that the world would see more everyday miracles if we all brought what we have and what we are to Christ. Although only one boy brought his own lunch to Jesus, Jesus saw that there were resources to feed five thousand people. Jesus blessed this simple food and inspired people to share, bringing to life a miracle that the people themselves created.

When Sun and I were vacationing in Seattle two weeks ago, we spent several days with Sun's sister and her family. My sister-in-law has a four-year-old grandson named Elijah. We went for a walk one morning with Elijah and his grandparents. Along the walkway, Elijah found a dandelion flower that had turned white with seed. He made a wish and blew the seeds away. His grandmother asked him what his wish was, and Elijah said he had wished for a toy. That evening, Sun took Elijah to the mall. She told him to pick out what he wished for, and bought him that toy. His wish came true. Where there is a problem, then is also the solution.

For Jesus, the way out was always the way through. To him, the solution to the problem could not be found by running or hiding, but by facing it squarely and courageously, facing it with trust in the Father. Have confidence that where there is a problem in your life, the solution lies in having faith in God. Offer yourself to God and wait for God's guidance, and then God will solve your problem with the solution within you.