

Luke 9:10-17
Serving the Meal
Rev. Jonathan Cornell
1-11-15

There is a phenomenon today that I think is sweeping through our culture. The culprit? YouTube. Some of you may be familiar with “The YouTube.” Some of you may have been sucked down what my family calls “the YouTube Wormhole.” If you have, then you know what I’m talking about. A well meaning friend or family member sends you a video of cats climbing into small spaces or 5 year olds playing the drums, something cute or fascinating they found on YouTube. One video leads to a second and a third, and pretty soon moments turn into hours and you’re trapped in the vortex.

But even worse is that we watch videos of these amazing feats, like 5 year olds banging away on the drums, and we say, “Meh, that’s not so amazing; I’ve seen it before.” They don’t captivate us anymore, they don’t make a claim on us or invite us to a deeper sense of wonderment or cause us to reflect upon the bigger circumstances of our human race. Am I being overly philosophical about YouTube? Probably.

Why I say this is that I think something similar can happen to us when we read God’s Word. There are so many things going on around us that we move too quickly from one thing to the next, and we become desensitized to what God wants to show or teach us each and every time we open His Word. We read these stories and these passages and we think to ourselves, “Yep, I know that one, heard it before.” Glossing over the deep and rich messages that are there for us each and every time.

Today’s story is one of these passages: our Lord’s feeding of the 5,000. Which for those of you who are keeping track at home, is one of only a few stories that makes it into all four gospel narratives. This passage is one of those stories that many of us have known since the time we began. In fact, most people—even those who don’t read the Bible regularly—are familiar with the feeding of the 5,000.

So what I’d like to do this morning with you is save the reading of our text until the very last part of the message. If you are here this morning, chances are, at least to some degree, you are here because you know that God’s Word makes a unique claim on your life. Maybe you don’t know what that claim is, maybe you’re wrestling with that claim, maybe you need it refreshed. Whatever the case, I believe that every text, even this one, has a unique and special message it speaks over our lives. That’s why I want to look at the lessons of this passage first, and then, at the very end, read it aloud together, so that this passage would go with us and cover us this week. OK?

This is one of the most important and practical passages in Jesus’ ministry, because what happens to Jesus happens to all of us. All of us, at one time or another, have our lives interrupted. What do we do when we’re in the middle of something, only to have someone unexpectedly place a request on our time or energy? It happens to all of us, and

what I'd like to suggest is that these are some of the richest and most important opportunities for gospel ministry there are.

Jesus' apostles have just returned from an important mission and Jesus wants to take them up the mountain for a little retreat—recharge the batteries. Problem is, the crowds don't get the message. They follow Jesus right up the mountain. So what does Jesus do? He doesn't say, "Sorry folks, office hours are over, I'm not available." No. The text says that he welcomed them and spoke to them about the Kingdom of God.

Commentator Fred Craddock suggests that those who come with pressing needs are never an interruption. Ministry continues through us; it just happens in unexpected locations. And this is some of the most important time there is. Once chapter earlier, when Jesus is on the way to heal Jairus' dying daughter, a woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years reached out and touched him along the way. How did Jesus respond? He didn't say, "Sorry no time, got a scheduled patient to treat." No, the need that was right in front of him took precedence.

The same thing happens in our Old Testament passage this morning. In between raising a woman's son and healing Naaman the Commander of his leprosy, Elisha the Prophet feeds a crowd of people in a famine-stricken land.

Those who are in need of what we can offer are never an interruption. Doesn't make it easy though. Studies show that people are more willing to part with their money than they are with their time. It's the one thing everyone has, but none of us can get back.

This week began for me with the unfortunate and difficult task of performing two memorial services in consecutive days, Sunday afternoon and Monday. A task made even more difficult in light of the fact that I really did not know either person in any way. So on Monday afternoon, after finishing the second, I came back to the office, and with only a few hours before I headed home for dinner and family time, I decided I was going down to Modoc's with my book for an hour to read and pray and decompress.

As I am packing up my things, my office phone rings. I see who is calling and in that moment decide not to pick up the phone. My conscience is doubly challenged by the fact that I also have a little rectangle that I carry in my pocket, which rang shortly thereafter. Wabash County Hospital. My heart sort of sank. If they're calling the office and then trying my cell, this can't be good.

I pick up. "Hello, Rev Cornell, this is the hospital. There is a family here who has just experienced a tragedy and we haven't been able to get a hold of our first, second or third string Chaplains." I briefly think to myself, *But I'm not scheduled until April.* "Can you come in?" In this moment, I sensed that God was working on me. "Yes, I can come." That afternoon I sat and prayed and wept with the family of the 18-year-old boy who was killed Monday morning when his car was hit by a train.

Jesus shows us that those who press in on us and on our time are never interruptions.

Jesus brings the crowd in to him and his disciples and tells them about the Kingdom. How could he not? It was the very thing that was happening right then. But then, Luke says, the day begins to wear away, the sun starts to go down, and people realize it's getting close to supper time. These people are need to eat. So the disciples come to Jesus and say, "Jesus, why don't we call a TO, send 'em all back to town to grab dinner and a hotel room for the night, then have 'em come back tomorrow?" Seems like the logical and not unreasonable thing to do.

But then Jesus—knowing that the disciples don't have enough cash to buy food to feed 5,000 men, and the women and children who were in the crowd that day—says to them, facetiously, almost nonchalantly, "You give them something to eat." *You've just healed in the name of the living God, lives have been transformed in your going out on mission; surely we can feed them, right guys?*

Then in the midst of their ministry, their rest and recovery, in the midst of their living together, Jesus performs a miracle. The text tells us that Jesus told his disciples to "have them sit down in groups of fifty each. And taking the five loaves and two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing over them and broken them and gave them to his disciples to set before the crowd."

Now scholars think that the disciples took large baskets and put the loaves and fish inside them and moved from group to group handing out fish and bread, and the baskets continued to produce. So much so that at the end, there was food left over. Lots of food. There was a genuine miracle that took place here. But the disciples have come to expect that. Jesus has healed lame people, given sight to blind people, raised dead people. Why would we have any doubt that he couldn't feed all these hungry people? But the other miracle, the one happening right before the eyes of the disciples, that if they're not careful they'll miss it, is the miracle of a fully integrated life.

Jesus reveals to the disciples that in his kingdom, tables are not disconnected from everyday life and ministry. In God's kingdom, the table is fully integrated, the table is turned outward into what's going on all around him. When tables are integrated into the healing and teaching and prophetic work of the church, miracles happen.

John Koenig, 1956 graduate of Wabash High, was a Theologian and Pastor in New York City in 2001. He tells a story of having lunch one day with the pastor of St. Paul's Chapel in Lower Manhattan, a church that somehow miraculously had survived the terrorist attack of 9/11. Not long afterward, the church began the task of sharing in the healing and relief efforts with all who were involved. Restaurants began sending over containers of food to be served in the back of the chapel, socks and clean shirts and other clothes for workers were delivered and taken down into the hole. The church was a central player in Lower Manhattan's recovery.

Once the building was deemed structurally sound, a makeshift food ministry began. City workers, engineers, politicians, and military personnel gathered throughout the day to recharge and fill their tanks. Ten days later, at noon, the church began celebrating the

Eucharist. Every day, people would come for food. Some would join in the Communion service, many would not. But the miracle of this event was the way in which it revealed a fully integrated life and ministry. Relief was happening all around – physical, structural, and of course spiritual – and it happened around a table.

One person said of it: “It is the most incredible hodgepodge of humanity I’ve ever seen in a church...there were the chiropractors and massage therapists doing their thing along the side aisles. There were rescue workers sleeping or eating lunch. There were National Guard troops from the farms and forests of upstate New York looking very young and lost in the big city. People sat on the floor and on the steps leading to the choir loft. People who were at first not interested in the Mass when it began found themselves drawn into the ancient prayer that promised life forever with God and ended up taking communion with tears in their eyes. This was Christ’s church in all its messiness, ambiguity, brokenness and holiness. It was truly beautiful.”

Verse 17 provides a perfect conclusion to this impromptu, yet incomparable ministry moment. Luke says that everyone who was present at this meal ate and was satisfied. Gospel ministry, lives made complete, is not always what happens when we plan it to; it’s what happens when people like you and me respond to the interruptions that come our way, and when we live integrated lives a part of God’s Kingdom here present on earth.

Pastor and theologian John Piper has a saying that has come to encapsulate his writing on a subject called Christian Hedonism: “God is most glorified, when we are most satisfied in Him.” What happens when Jesus turns tables from isolated events to integrated elements of our lives together, people experience genuine kingdom satisfaction...and that is transforming.

Now having looked at this text once again, hopefully with fresh perspective, would you stand with me as we hear once again this familiar Gospel story? Luke’s account of Jesus satisfying the hunger 5,000 people.

On their return the apostles told him all that they had done. And he took them and withdrew apart to a town called Bethsaida. When the crowds learned it, they followed him, and he welcomed them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing. Now the day began to wear away, and the twelve came and said to him, “Send the crowd away to go into the surrounding villages and countryside to find lodging and get provisions, for we are here in a desolate place.” But he said to them, “You give them something to eat.” They said, “We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people.” For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, “Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each.” And they did so, and had them all sit down. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing over them. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And they all ate and were satisfied. And what was left over was picked up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.