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The Sharing and Accepting of Gifts in the Feeding of the Five Thousand

Corein Brown

After this, Jesus went across the Sea of Galilee (of Tiberias). A large crowd followed him, because they saw the signs he was performing on the sick. Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. The Jewish feast of Passover was near. When Jesus raised his eyes and saw that a large crowd was coming to him, he said to Philip, "Where can we buy enough food for them to eat?" He said this to test him, because he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Two hundred days' wages worth of food would not be enough for each of them to have a little (bit)." One of his disciples, Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what good are these for so many?" Jesus said, "Have the people recline." Now there was a great deal of grass in that place. So the men reclined, about five thousand in number. Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to those who were reclining, and also as much of the fish as they wanted. When they had had their fill, he said to his disciples, "Gather the fragments left over, so that nothing will be wasted." So they collected them, and filled twelve wicker baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves that had been more than they could eat. When the people saw the sign he had done, they said, "This is truly the Prophet, the one who is to come into the world." Since Jesus knew that they were going to come and carry him off to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain alone.

John 6: 1-15 (NAB)

Within the miracle of loaves and fishes there is a story of the acceptance or the possible rejection of our own gifts and the gifts of others.

Jesus poses a ridiculous question to his disciples as over five thousand people come seeking him out. He asks his disciples, "Where can we

buy enough food for them to eat?" I imagine that as the disciples looked out at the sea of people this was one of the many times they wondered if they should go back to their day jobs because at best they were following a clueless man and at worst a lunatic. The author of the Gospel of John tells us that Jesus asked this to test the disciples, but Philip, not privy to this information, lets Jesus know that this is a completely impossible task. There is no way they can feed such a large crowd. As Philip points out the obvious to Jesus, Andrew points out a boy with five loaves and two fishes.

Nothing else is said about the boy beyond his offering, but I cannot help but wonder about him and what he might have to say to us. I imagine him overhearing the conversation between the disciples and Jesus. And I wonder why he chose to get involved. Did he see the hunger of others and want to help? Did he want to be a part of the disciples, be part of something big and beyond himself? While we cannot, of course, know his motivations, we do know by his action that for some reason he wanted to be involved and wanted to offer what he had.

I think it is important also to imagine what this boy risked by offering the five loaves and two fish. Where did he get the food? Did it belong to his family? Did he have to steal away with the food so that his parents would not see that he was about to give away what little they had? And what about approaching Jesus and his disciples? The young boy was with the crowd who was seeking Jesus out, but he would have been aware, to some degree, of the danger and unpredictability that was forming around Jesus and his disciples. And finally, it seems he would have known that his small amount of food could do little to feed such a huge crowd.

The apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:1 exhorts us to, "Live in a manner worthy of the call we have received." I believe this little boy in the gospel might have something to say about what it means to live in a manner worthy of the call we have received. This boy offered his gifts despite the risk and despite the reality that what he had to offer was not enough to relieve the hunger of so many. He listened to the urge and call within himself to offer those five

loaves and two fish. He offered what he had, what was unique to him to give.

And so the question is posed to us, what stops us from giving in life? What stops us from living in a way worthy of our own unique call? Do we think that what we have is not enough, possibly even pathetically too little? Are we afraid that if we give there will not be enough for ourselves? Are we so concerned with what others will think that we are too afraid to risk?

So often our actions and decisions are based on whether we perceive that we will be welcomed or rejected by others. If the boy was at all afraid of possible rejection or ridicule his fears were well-founded. Andrew notices the boy but says to Jesus, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish but what good are these for so many?" I think it is safe to bet that Andrew and the other disciples would have sent the naive little boy back to his family. But at this point the miraculous happens: Jesus accepts this boy's offering, gives thanks, and what was little becomes enough to feed five thousand men and the thousands of uncounted women and children.

We learn from this boy what can really become of our gifts even if they seem to be little in our eyes or little to those around us. In Jesus, our gifts are not less, or unwanted, or imperfect; they are exactly, perfectly what is desired by God. They are beautiful and completely what is needed. They are accepted and not only accepted but also lifted up to the Father in gratitude, and, when distributed, they nourish more people than we will ever know.

But before moving too quickly to the miraculous ending of this story it is important to be attentive to Andrew and his response to the boy. Andrew saw the boy but quickly questioned what good his meager offering could do. We must also examine when practicality or the immensity of the problem blinds us to those who are risking to give. We must ask ourselves what blinds us to other's offerings.

As I looked for an example in my own life I was reminded of when I was a campus minister. I worked at a fairly wealthy, predominantly white, Catholic college. I led service projects for the students. I often told the students that while our service was wonderful, necessary, and something to be celebrated, it was still a testimony to the imbalance of power and injustice in the world. That as white, wealthy Americans our service and giving even came out of a place of power. That our freedom to give

and presumption that our giving would be received with open, thankful hands still symbolized a distortion of power. It was an example of why charity could not suffice but that we must also work for justice, to empower and respect others so that their gifts may be seen, fostered, and offered within the community as well. I never felt like my point got across to the students. It was an abstract idea that we did not put into practice.

One spring I went with a group of girls from the college to Juarez, Mexico, for a service-immersion trip. We were going to stay with a group of women in the colonias outside of Juarez. The colonias are shantytowns built on the outskirts of cities often on top of old landfills. Before heading out to the colonias we stopped at the markets in Juarez. The students shopped and toured for a couple of hours and when we returned to our van we discovered it had been broken into and all of our backpacks, clothes, and sleeping bags were stolen. The students were understandably upset and most felt like we should quit and head immediately back to the United States. But by the grace of God and a little conniving we convinced the students to stay and go to the women's program in the colonias at least for the night.

When we got to the colonias, we told the American sisters what had happened and how upset the girls were. The sisters relayed the story to the women who would be our hosts during our stay. It was March and, while the days were already very hot, the nights in the desert still got very cold, and many of the girls were wearing only flip flops, shorts, t-shirts. While the girls shyly stayed together near the van, the women left to go back to their homes. They returned with their own blankets, pillows, pants, sweatshirts, and shoes for the girls. The women and the girls then worked together past their language barriers and got to know one another by finding who had the right size shoes, pants, and sweatshirts. As they did this, one of the American sisters turned to me and said, "What a beautiful thing that God has brought you here so that the poor may cloth you."

We found ourselves in a situation where we had to humbly receive the gifts of those whom we thought we were supposed to serve. We entered Mexico from a privileged place, as educated Americans assuming we were doing the offering, we were helping. And instead we were served in a very profound and meaningful way. Relationships were built that week that I do not think would have been

built if the girls had not been put in a situation to receive the gifts of these women.

Most of us, particularly in America, pride ourselves on our ability to provide for ourselves and not need the charity of others. We could have quite easily crossed the border, gone to the nearest Wal-Mart and purchased our own clothes, but instead we learned how to receive. The small gifts of used sneakers, pants, and sweatshirts were catalysts for a week of giftedness. Our time in Mexico, while short, was an incredibly meaningful week of living in community together. We got to know women who were a profound example of what it meant to risk and offer despite the innumerable obstacles they faced. Despite the fact that the men of their community and their government were unsupportive and even hostile to them. Despite the fact that many of the people just twenty miles across the border in the United States would label them as a problem and burden, blinded to the important, irreplaceable gifts they were offering.

And so we must ask ourselves, how are we the disciples? When do we come from a privileged place, working from a place of power where we do not have to accept the gifts and offerings from others? When do we not allow others the freedom to give because it is hard to receive? Or when do we, so practical and educated, see what others are offering and see it as way too little, like Andrew? When, by our own power, are we blinded to the power of

Christ working through the one giving and the gift itself?

Perhaps we could spend some time asking ourselves when we need to be like the little boy. When do we need to risk? When do we need to offer our gifts even when we might think they are too little? How are we to live in a manner worthy of our call? And when do we act as the disciples? When do we blind ourselves to the other? Particularly in our faith, when do we act in pride, because of our knowledge or perceived closeness to God as Jesus' disciples? When in our lives are people offering us their gifts, their unique and beautiful offerings and we are blind to them or outright reject them?

And most importantly, how can we live recognizing the power of Jesus? That while our gifts may seem small and others may think it is wise to send us back to where we came from, Jesus welcomes and even desires our gifts, just as they are. He takes the little and makes it into an abundance.

Let us pray that we can offer our gifts and receive those of others, so together our time and talent, our bread and fish may be set before the Lord so that it may be distributed back into the world. May we discover that through our offering not only will there be just enough to survive but our baskets will overflow and in our offering Jesus will turn our gifts into an abundance where all are satisfied and all are filled.



Moral Theology Haiku

by Mary LaVoy

Dinner at the Reef
Apple, orange, pocket fruit!
It's not stealing, right?