“YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT”

Luke 9:10–17

Key Verse: 9:13a

“But he said to them, ‘You give them something to eat.’”

What do you think it means to be a disciple of Jesus? In any setting, a disciple is somebody disciplined by somebody else, a learner or an imitator of a teacher. Theoretically we may consider Jesus as our teacher. But if so, what should we really be learning from him? Today’s passage is mentioned in all four Gospels. The feeding of the five thousand was an unforgettable event. It shows that Jesus can do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. It’s also a preview of God’s kingdom, where everyone will be fully satisfied and share joyful fellowship with him. But the main focus here is his training his disciples. What’s his point? Is he trying to make them reckless extremists who ignore all boundaries and all realities? What does he want them and us to learn here? As we meditate on these verses, may God himself speak to our hearts today.

Look at verse 10. The twelve are now called “apostles” because they had been sent by Jesus to do his work. He gave them his power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal (1–2). For this mission journey he told them to take nothing, but only depend on God (3). When they simply did what he said, they went through the villages, preaching the gospel and healing everywhere (6). Now they return and tell him all that they had done. Surely they had many amazing stories. After all that ministry work, they must have been more tired than they realized. It says Jesus “took them and withdrew apart.” He wanted them to get away from the crowds. Bethsaida is a town on the northeast corner of the Sea of Galilee. But the place on the seashore there is actually “desolate” (12b). Jesus wanted to give his disciples time and space to rest and recover. It seems to have been a rare occurrence. The disciples must have been thrilled.

But it was not to be. Verse 11a says, “When the crowds learned it, they followed him…” Jesus and his disciples just can’t catch a break. These people don’t have a clue how demanding they’re being. Most people would be a little irritated with them. How does Jesus respond? Verse 11b says, “…he welcomed them…” It’s that word Luke loves to use. Jesus is not begrudgingly doing it; he’s open-hearted and willing, even though it doesn’t seem to be his plan. Matthew and Mark mention his compassion; Mark includes that he saw these people “like sheep without a shepherd.” It’s not just a few people; it’s a huge crowd of 5,000 men, not counting women and children. To “welcome” them doesn’t mean mere lip service; Jesus is ready to take care of them all, and all their needs. Disciples of Jesus need to learn how to welcome needy and demanding people at the most inconvenient times, just like Jesus did.

What does Jesus do for them? It says “…he spoke to them of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing” (11b). Luke gives us the most specific description here of what Jesus actually did for this crowd. Throughout his ministry Jesus always pointed people to the hope of God’s kingdom. It’s always tempting for us to try and fix society, or at least to create a little heaven on earth for ourselves. But disciples of Jesus learn to put our hope in God’s kingdom, and share this living hope with whoever comes to us. Jesus also always addressed people’s illnesses. We often pretend there’s nothing wrong with us, or with others. We may not have physical problems, but we all have life wounds that really need God’s healing. As we open up and let Jesus heal us, we taste God’s kingdom. Disciples of Jesus don’t ignore our own or others’ spiritual problems, but really care about these deeper issues and pray sincerely for healing.

Verse 12a says, “Now the day began to wear away…” Unexpectedly, Jesus drops everything and has been ministering all day long, without a break. And it’s interesting that the people stay there with him, even though they have no meals. It speaks both to how engaging Jesus is, and how spiritually thirsty these people are. There’s just one group of people there with a different idea: “the twelve.” Not only were their hopes of a retreat with Jesus dashed, but on top of their mission journey, this intense all-day event began to wear away their strength and their patience.

They come to Jesus with a reasonable, practical plan: “Send the crowd away to go into the surrounding villages and countryside to find lodging and get provisions…” (12). Obviously most of these folks are not from this area; home for them is not close by. Luke is the only Gospel writer who mentions “lodging.” It’s part of the holistic approach to ministry that cares not just for some but for all of people’s needs. Coupled with the word “welcome,” Luke is implying that disciples can’t be selfish; we need to be ready to open our homes to brothers and sisters.

The twelve just told Jesus what to do, but now Jesus turns the tables and tells them what to do: “You give them something to eat” (13a). We like it when Jesus is working hard to serve all kinds of needy, broken, outcast people out of his great compassion. But sometimes we forget that he also said this to his disciples. He’s challenging them when they’re super tired, and when they’ve got absolutely no means to do it. Frankly, it’s unreasonable. Honestly, it seems too much. As we said before, what’s the point?

**First**, disciples of Jesus have a sense of responsibility for their people. We’ve all known certain people who are kind of like escape artists. When there’s any kind of work to do, suddenly these people have so many reasons not to join in. Our sinful tendency is to expect other people to do the hard work for us. It’s easy to think that because of our situation, we just can’t be responsible for others. But Jesus doesn’t allow us to think that way. His words “You give them something to eat” instill in us a sense of responsibility, even when we have no way to help people. This is the trademark and starting point of any kind of leader: to take real responsibility for people.

**Second**, disciples of Jesus learn his love for people. Here, feeding represents really caring about people, really loving them. James 2:15–16 reads, “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?” 1 John 3:17–18 also says, “But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.” Disciples of Jesus are called to live lives of love, caring about people’s practical problems and needs and actually doing something about it. We may have a little or a lot, but the Bible calls us all to be “generous and ready to share” (1Ti6:18). It’s a love that doesn’t give up, but finds a way even when there seems to be no way. We’re called to sacrifice and serve others not out of mere duty, but with authentic love (1Co13:3). Disciples of Jesus learn such love.

**Third**, disciples of Jesus learn the faith to depend on Jesus. When the disciples sized up the situation, it was not good. The day was almost over, the place was remote, and, the people were tired and hungry. These were all realities. It’s good to face reality. But there was another reality the disciples were not considering: Jesus. Jesus is there with them. Jesus can do the impossible. He still works in and through the people who simply depend on him. When we think of all the need in our world today, it can seem overwhelming. There’s so much pain, so much injustice, and on top of that, so little truth, so little real knowledge of God. So many people are wandering, so many are crushed, so many are hurting and really lost. It seems so few people even begin to care. Who cares? Jesus cares. He really does. And he can actually do something for people. He can still heal and bring people real hope. He can meet all people’s needs. He can fully satisfy people’s souls. But how does he work? It’s not in a vacuum. He works through people. He works through those who depend on him.

Instead of depending on our own brain power or human strength or willpower to get things done, we need to learn to depend on Jesus. It may seem too simple, but it’s the main point of his training. We naturally depend on ourselves. In fact, being independent is kind of idolized in our culture. Self-help is very popular. Self-sufficiency is the goal. Self-dependence is a deeply ingrained habit of living for most of us. We love it when we can say, “I did it!” We’re just not used to depending on Jesus. So God trains us. He puts us in hard situations. He helps us see how little we actually can do. It’s not to humiliate us: it’s to bring us to Jesus and to start really depending on him. We need to reduce how much we’re thinking of ourselves and what we can do, and increase how much we’re considering Jesus and what he can do. Apostle Paul famously wrote, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Php4:13). More recently, the famous missionary William Carey coined the slogan: “Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.” He was nothing but a lowly shoemaker, but with such faith to depend on God, just this one man inspired the modern missionary movement. Disciples of Jesus learn to depend on him in ministering to all the needs of people. Then Jesus himself works mightily.

At Jesus’ words, the disciples are initially resistant. Look at verse 13b. “They said, ‘We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people.’” In other words, this is ridiculous even to ask. And how does Jesus respond to them? Look at verse 14b. “And he said to his disciples, ‘Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each.’” In that situation this is something they can actually do. Still, it might seem kind of futile: sit down for what? How do they respond? Verse 15 puts it so simply: “And they did so, and had them all sit down.” Disciples trust and obey Jesus even when they don’t fully understand how things will work. And now the entire situation has changed. Now, instead of thinking of all the problems in this reality, everyone is expecting Jesus to do something.

In this environment, what does Jesus do? Read verse 16. He thanks God by faith, even before the miracle happens. With 5,000 men sitting there, he blesses the ridiculously small thing the disciples brought him—the five loaves and the two fish. And then the miracle happens. As Jesus breaks them, things start multiplying. It makes the twelve disciples suddenly very busy distributing all the food to all these hungry people. By human calculation this could never happen. But when they had just a tiny bit of faith, Jesus could work with that. And in the hands of Jesus, this desolate place becomes like an abundant banquet hall where everyone is welcome. It’s just a small glimpse of the great banquet in the kingdom of God someday. Look at verse 17. Twelve baskets of leftovers—more than enough for each disciple who’d been so busy serving others. The message is: when we depend on Jesus in simple trust and obedience and get busy serving others, he never fails to take care of our needs.

Read verse 13a again. So, who’s a disciple of Jesus? Someone who learns responsibility for others, real love, and to simply depend on Jesus. May he do great things even through us as we learn these things from him.