

## "THE BOY WHO WASN'T EVEN COUNTED"

INTRODUCTION The Gospel of John tells a story that is familiar to all of us - the story of the loaves and fishes. It comes at a time in the ministry of Jesus when His preaching and healing had become known everywhere in Galilee, but particularly along the seaside where He gained His first following.

In this story, Jesus has tried to escape from the press of people and He and the disciples have retreated to a quiet part of the Lake. But the crowd will not leave Him, and hurrying around the end of the lake they gather about Him again. John says there was a crowd of 5,000, but in those pre-ERA days, women and children were not counted, so the group was probably a great deal larger.

DEVELOPMENT When it came time for the people to eat, Jesus turns to His disciple, Philip, and asks, "Where are you going to buy bread to feed all these people?" Philip replies, "200 denarii (\$40.00) would not be enough to buy food for each one to have a little". Forty dollars was a fortune to the disciples, but the question was really academic; even if they had money, which they did not, there was simply no place to buy food.

Then Andrew, another disciple speaks up and says, "There is a boy here with five loaves of barley and two fish, but what is that with so many?" Jesus asks for the people to sit down and the story says He gave thanks, broke the loaves and fishes and gave them to the disciples to distribute to the people. And everybody had something to eat.

EXPLANATION Now a story of this kind troubles all of us who have been brought up in a scientific world. On one hand we are uncomfortable with a miracle of this sort, troubled because it seems to go against all that we know about an orderly physical universe. And on the other hand, we cannot help but speculate that if Jesus had such power, why He did not end hunger for all people for all time.

Some people have suggested that the easiest explanation is that the example of this young boy who was willing to share was so contagious that everybody brought out what they had and enjoyed one grand pot-luck meal. And in that sense we have here a tremendous miracle of sharing.

Whatever you want to believe about the Gospel account, what John was really saying was that in Jesus He saw a man who was able to handle any emergency, a person to satisfy all our hungers. And whether Christians will be able to do the same in His name is one of the major questions of our time. You cannot help but know that the problem of world hunger is one of the major crises our planet faces in the coming years. There are increasingly too many people on our planet for the food resources we have. But the crucial fact - and I hope you remember it - is that there are enough resources now to care for all, except for one thing: they are so unevenly distributed that some have more than they need and others not enough even to survive.

So this sermon is about hunger, on a scale that will make our gifts on the altar next Sunday only one little raindrop in an ocean of need. I'd like to look at this problem with you by looking at the people involved in the story of the loaves and fishes, for they mirror our own attitudes, I think, toward the people we face.

FIRST PERSON: PHILIP The first person is Philip. He is the disciple who sees the enormity of the problem and declares it hopeless.

"Forty dollars would not buy enough bread for everyone to have even a little." I think Philip can stand for all of us who see the problem and understand how vast it is and decide that nothing can be done.

The facts are really awful about the difference between the "haves" and the "have nots" of our world. We American, for example, have an average income of more than \$11,000 per year. We spend \$1,900 of it on food, \$738 on recreation, \$200 on alcohol and \$120 on cigarettes. Our government is wealthy enough to spend \$400 for us on defense. We are only 6% of the world's population, but we consume 33% of the world's energy, 44% of the world's newsprint and we own 43% of the telephones and motor vehicles in the world. Our daily calories are 3,120.

The "Have nots" of our world are 73% of its population. 2½ billion are illiterate, 15,000 die of starvation each day. One billion live on \$4 weekly. The average income for the "have nots" is \$200 - equal to the amount we Americans spend on alcohol.

A quick scan of the world will tell you all you need to know. If you live in Pakistan there is a 10 to 1 chance you cannot read, 80% chance you are undernourished, 25% chance that any child you have will die before 5. If you live in Nigeria, there is 77% probability you live in one room, no electricity, no running water and your probable life span is 37 years. If you are ill, you find there is one MD for each 42,467 people compared to one MD for each 634 people in the USA.

In India there are 2.3 radios per 100 persons. In Ghana there are 8.5 radios per 100. In America there are 169 radios per 100 persons. So when someone talks to underdeveloped nations about "pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps" he needs the corrective of Mrs. Ghandi reminding him tartly that that only applies to people who already have boots!

The picture is frightening. We cannot help but feel that there is no way that anything we can do can possibly have much affect on that great tide of human need. And mostly we don't want to think about it, or we feel that when we have brought a couple of cans of food we have done it all. It is easy to succumb to the feeling that there is nothing we can do. And like Philip, we are ready to conclude that the problem is beyond our resources and there's no use trying the impossible.

THEN THERE'S: ANDREW Then there is Andrew. He may feel the problem is bleak, but he gets one star for trying to do something. What he does is identify the resources that are there. There are not many of them - 5 loaves and two small fishes. But he brings them forward to Jesus anyway.

It is the Andrews among us who bring a can of food whenever the word goes out that the food pantry is empty. It is the Andrew in us, although she did not know it, who said that she had stopped drinking beer and alcohol made from a grain base when she heard someone say that the grain Americans consumed in alcoholic beverages would feed 26 million in India. It may seem a futile or an insignificant gesture, but it is a gesture in the right direction. So is the decision of a family I know of to eat less beef. So is the gesture to bring a can of food for the pantry.

Let me make a few other suggestions: Andrew helps us resist consumerism - the assumption that we have to purchase. Laugh at the TV ads that try to sell you more of what you don't need. Look at how much you buy for status rather than for real need. The Andrews in us give our children our time and love rather than more things.

All of these suggestions are not much - they are probably no more than a little boy's lunch in the face of 5,000 people. But they are something, and the Andrews of our congregation should get credit for continually reminding us that there is something any of us can do rather than just be intimidated by the problem!

THE BOY WITH THE LUNCH

And then there is the boy with the lunch. In the eyes of the Gospel writer a total non-entity - not even counted. "There were 5,000 men, not counting women and children". Ironic, isn't it. I find myself wishing we knew more about that boy. His name. Why he came to hear Jesus that day. Who had packed his lunch? Do you suppose his mother said, "You can't go without taking something to eat". And he, resisting, mumbled, "Aw, mom, none of the other guys have to drag a lunch along". We don't know anything about him except that he was willing to give what he had to be used by somebody else. The boy who wasn't even counted. He made a difference that day!

And I suppose he therefore needs to represent all the persons you know - or maybe you, yourself - who are moved to acts that put the larger good ahead of their own selfish desires. The word is divestment, having less so that others can have some. In an age of hunger, the demand is on us for compassionate action and simplified life styles. But this may result in little beyond a burst of personal piety. If millions of Americans reduce their beef consumption, but fail to act politically to change public policy, there will not be much change in the spectre of world hunger and famine ahead.

We need a review of food policy in this nation. The new thing in our time is the change in world grain production. Before World War II, all major geographic areas except Western Europe grew more grain than they needed. Today every major geographic region except North America must import grain. By 1985 the shortages in the world will be catastrophic.

The greatest tragedy is that the governments of the world continue to prefer bombs to bread. President Eisenhower was right on target when he wrote:

"Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed."

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Look at our disarmament program the eyes of world hunger and you see how crucial it is. Like so many of you, I covet for our nation to be the breadbasket of the world and not its arms supplier.

Let me remind you of that boy again. He did not know how to feed that great multitude, but he did what he could. He was willing to have less so that others might have something, and therein is the path for the Christian to walk. And so let me lay on you a responsibility this Thanksgiving - not to just stuff ourselves into acid indigestion, but to try to do three things.

FIRST: BE A PHILIP First, be a Philip. Try to understand the problem. Do not turn away from depressing statistics. Have the facts. We are not called upon to succeed, but to be faithful.

SECOND: BE AN ANDREW Second, be an Andrew. Provide hands for those services we know about. Do kindness. You'll be bringing cans of food next Sunday, hopefully, for the Yorkville Common Pantry. Bring some along with you on other Sundays. Make a gift to help the YEA.

THIRD: BE LIKE THE BOY

Third, be like the boy - divesting, giving into the hands of one who was there all that he had to give. Justice for a world should be our model - not just charity.

And think, too, for a moment about the other person in this story. Remember it was Jesus who was there. And John says that with those loaves and fishes He made a miracle. I believe we serve a God who is that kind of God. That He can do far more than we can imagine with the little we have to give. That He can use even those inadequate materials we provide. Again and again I realize how true that is.

CLOSING STORY

Let me tell you a story. In the year 1876 a girl named Annie, not yet ten years old, was put into what was then called the Tewkesbury Alms House in Massachusetts. Her mother was dead; her father had deserted her; her aunt and uncle found her too hard to handle. She had a bad disposition, a violent temper, stemming in part from eyes afflicted with painful trachoma. She was put away in the almshouse because nobody wanted her, and she was such a wild animal that at times they had to tie her down.

Another of the inmates was named Maggie, and Maggie talked to her, even fed the young girl who would throw food on the floor, cursing, hating, and rebelling with every ounce of her being. Maggie was a Christian and she tried to love this dirty, unkempt, spiteful, unloving girl. She told Annie she wanted to help her. It wasn't easy, but slowly the idea got through to Annie that she wasn't alone in her suffering....that Maggie was suffering, too, and Annie began to respond.

Maggie told her about a school for the blind and when a legislative committee looked in to the desperate conditions at the poorhouse, Annie clamoured for a chance to go to the Blind School. So she went to the Perkins Institute, where she had a series of operations which partially restored her sight and finished school, graduating at the age of 20.

Having been virtually blind for so long, she had been taught the manual alphabet and she told the director of the school that she wanted to teach blind people. So they found a case for her...a little seven year old girl in Alabama who had been both deaf and blind from the age of two. So Anne Sullivan went to Tuscumbia, Alabama to unlock the door of Helen Keller's dark prison and set her spirit free. Anne Sullivan, called the Miracle Worker, but Anne Sullivan was herself the miracle of Maggie's gentle patience in an Almshouse. And this is how God uses the small things of our world to make a miracle happen. He can take the commitment of a simple girl like Maggie and multiply her love and influence through Anne and through Helen Keller until the world will not contain it.

FINAL STATEMENT

Dear friends, it is unlikely that any one of us will be in a position to greatly influence the course of our world in the matter of hunger. But my testimony is that whatever little we have that can be entrusted to God will not be wasted...but will be multiplied beyond our wildest dreams, beyond our imagining.

God can take a little - a little health, a little money, a little time, a little food - and make it go a long, long way!

## PRAYER

As we direct our thoughts to the great problems of life, help us, O God, to think clearly...

and then lead us out of ourselves toward Him who is the purpose of all men, that we may show forth in our lives something of His life, that the world through us may be lifted to Thee. In the name and spirit of Christ who died for all people - not just some - but for all.

In His name we pray.