



In the Gospel of John, on the night before Jesus is handed over to suffering and death, He gathers His friends, the disciples, for a kind of final teaching. They were afraid. They were unsure of what would happen next. The world was still very broken. He was trying to comfort them by assuring them that even as He goes to the Father, they would never be alone.

He would send His Holy Spirit to be with them, to teach them, to inspire them, to empower them, to complete the work that He had begun. Then He adds something that always stood out to me. He says that with the Holy Spirit by our side, we would go on to do even greater things than He. I wonder as we gather here today as Jesus' disciples, still full of doubts, still living in a very, very broken world, do we still believe that?

If you're skeptical, if you wonder if this might be some more hyperbole that Jesus was not shy to employ from time to time, I wouldn't blame you. After all, we can't walk on water. We can't heal people with a mere touch. We certainly can't create food out of thin air, as we just heard. If we can't do those things, how could it be possible to do even greater things?

And yet, if history is anything to go by, that is exactly what Christians have been doing for centuries. Going back to the time of Jesus, you know, the Romans built military hospitals - but to care for soldiers. Ordinary people, the poor, the elderly, the chronically ill, we were largely on our own. There was no imagination for healing the rest of us.

What value, after all, did we have to an empire looking to dominate and conquer? But Christians changed that. Believing that every person bore the image of God, and therefore every person had an inherent worth, they famously took in all of those who had been forgotten, who had been cast out, who had been seen as disposable. They showed the world a new way, and in time established the first public hospitals that not only healed all people, but changed the way we saw all people. How about

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William and Catherine Booth, who in the 19th century London saw families sleeping under bridges? And so they took it upon themselves to organize Christian business owners, and they opened a shelter where people would be fed and treated, which led to another, and then another, and eventually grew into one of the largest humanitarian missions that still exists to this day.

How about right here in Detroit, where Ruth Ellis, a Black lesbian woman, in the 1940s no less, moved by her faith, opened her home to LGBT youth who had nowhere else to go. She fed them, she sheltered them, she helped them finish school. And from that courageous act of hospitality, today we have the Ruth Ellis Center that is serving nearly 1,000 homeless youth every single year, and I am proud to say is one of our many ministry partners in the community.

These everyday Christians and countless others like them, inspired by Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, have fed and healed and literally saved the lives of millions around the world. Greater things indeed. If you're wondering, you know, how is it that, that such ordinary people could have such an extraordinary impact, I think our gospel lesson today offers a couple of important clues.

Right after the disciples, you know, finished complaining about how they didn't have enough food for everyone, did you catch what happens next? Jesus takes the five loaves, and before he tries to feed anyone, he blesses the bread. He blesses what they did have. Over the years, I've blessed cars, I've blessed pets, I've blessed marriages, I've blessed children at the altar rail.

This past month, I've even blessed a couple of homes. What does it mean to, to bless something? What comes to your mind when you hear that? Are we bestowing a kind of good luck charm? Do we bless cars to keep them from getting into accidents? Do we get a break on our insurance rates when we do? Do we bless our pets hoping they might behave better? I know that one doesn't work for a fact.

There are many ways to understand blessing, but the one that always resonated with me is that we bless something in order to dedicate it to God and to dedicate it to God's purposes. That is, to place whatever it is into the service of God, which means into the service of others.

When I bless homes, for example, one of the prayers says, "Lord, you welcomed the stranger and ate with outcasts. May this be a place where all are welcomed and where

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we will always have room for a guest." When I bless cars, we pray that we might show compassion to those on the road - including those on Woodward Boulevard.

But we also pray that our cars might become an instrument of your peace, that they might deliver food to the hungry or offer a ride to those in need. Blessing is about making all that we have and all that we are a channel for God's grace, and whenever we do that, it changes things. As we heard in the Old Testament reading, when Jacob finally receives God's blessing, it changes everything about him. It changes his name, his identity; it even changed the way he walks. When we dedicate ourselves and what we have to God, it changes how we see ourselves. It changes how we see others. It opens our imagination for the things we have and the ways they might serve the world. And little by little, the impossible starts to look a bit more possible. But Jesus doesn't stop there.

After blessing the bread, did you, did you catch what he does next? He hands the work back. He doesn't feed them himself. He doesn't need to be the hero. He gives the bread back to the disciples so that they may feed the crowd. This teaching played out in my living room two weeks ago. Whenever our girls come back from summer camp, the first thing they wanna do is teach us the songs that they sang and teach us the skits that they learned.

This year, the skit had Gianna pretending to be lost at sea and praying to God to rescue her. And soon enough, her sister comes by pretending to be a boat. You know, "Ahoy there, do you need help?" "No, thanks," Gianna says. "God will save me." Next, Alina is pretending to be a plane, flying overhead. "Do you need rescuing?" "No, thanks," Gianna says. "God's got this." Next, a helicopter, and it goes on like that. And sadly, eventually, Gianna does not make it. And when she gets to heaven, she goes right over to God and says, "Why didn't you rescue me? I prayed. I put my faith in you. I never wavered for a moment." And of course, God says, "Hmm, let me see. I sent you a boat. I sent you a plane. I sent you a helicopter. What more did you need?"

Jesus gives the work back because we are his hands and feet in the world. We are the rescuers of today. Inspired by Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are the ones that we've been waiting for. And I know, I know, in a world that is still so deeply broken, as our news feed loves to remind us every single day, the idea that each of us might be Christ's hands and feet in the world, up against all of that, it can seem like an overwhelming idea.

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If that's your feeling as well, you're not alone because that's the exact reaction the disciples had.

"What are you talking about? We can't feed all these people!"

"It's too big! We don't have enough."

We all know those voices, don't we? Those are the ones that are so good at talking us out of getting involved.

"We don't have what it takes. Certainly, there's other people more qualified than I."

"I'll just get in the way. Besides, what difference could little old me make? The problem is too big for anything I could do."

I was talking with somebody who was new to the church just before I left on vacation, and he wanted to get involved, but he wasn't sure how. He said things like, "You know, I'm not a doctor, I'm not a lawyer. Uh, I used to do a little teaching, but I don't really know the Bible. I can sing a little, but nowhere near for this choir." I said, "You know, it's really not about special skills or expertise or degrees or anything like that. With God, everything about us is a gift.

Every part of who we are can be used by God and be a gift to others. God can use our personalities, our love of entertaining, our ability to listen, our willingness to roll up our sleeves. God can use our passions, the people that we care about, the causes that break our heart. God can even use our life experiences, the good ones and even the painful ones.

Because in God's hands, our deepest wounds, after sufficient time has passed, after we've found some measure of healing ourselves, our wounds can become the place of the deepest connection with others. Because we can start to recognize that same hurt that we've been through, we can see it in others. We can see it in their face; we can hear it in their voice, and without even trying, we can suddenly find ourselves in a, in a quiet kinship with a total stranger, merely because we've walked that road ourselves.

We know the secret hurts, we know the shame, and with God's help, we can walk alongside them in ways that no one else could. I have to say, over these last seven years that I have been with you, I have seen that rhythm play out again and again in all of you.

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I've watched how so many of you have survived terrible loss only to turn around and lift up others. I've seen you take in families barely hanging on so that they might not just survive, but actually begin to thrive. I've seen you take in foster kids. I've seen you open your homes to refugees. I've seen you mentor those struggling with addiction. I've seen you stand beside those who are afraid because in some way or another, in some way, shape, or form, you have been there too. I've listened to you share the deep truth that you have discovered through your own life, that all of these stories are sacred. They are not something to hide. They are never something to be ashamed of, but all of them are stories that can be blessed by God and then used by God to heal someone else's.

After I returned from vacation in July, I popped into our Second Saturday ministry, which is, for those of you who don't know, about 50 or 60 people who come together on a Saturday once a month, and they pack meals for our ministry partners in Pontiac. There I saw him over in the corner, the person I had met with, boxing up some food. While I don't think he was doing the math, I later learned at staff meeting that over the course of this summer, that ministry is on track to provide well over 5,000 shelf-stable meals for families in need.

When I later asked him, you know, what moved him to volunteer for that, he said, "You know, I've been there too. There were times in my life where things were tight or I wasn't sure if I'd make rent. So if there was one small thing I could do to help someone else, well, that's something I needed to do."

That is how we feed the 5,000 today. That is how we do it, by putting aside our doubts, by coming together as a community and trusting that everything we have, everything we are, no matter how small or insignificant it might seem, can be blessed by God to be a blessing for others. So that is my prayer for all of you, that you will always be a church that keeps trying, that never gives up, that never gives in, and never stops believing that together we can and we will do even greater things.

Amen.