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John 6:1-11  
**Compassion Fatigue**  
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It has been a busy time for Jesus and the disciples. He is at the height of his popularity, and so we are told that a large crowd had begun to follow him. Wanting to get a break from caring for all of the people, Jesus takes his disciples on a retreat. They cross over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, and climb a mountain to be by themselves for a little while. But just as they are about to settle into this time alone, they discover that the large crowd has followed. Five thousand people are heading their way.

The next thing that happens is just fascinating: "When Jesus looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' Now put yourself in Philip's sandals. There have been days and days of non-stop ministry with these people. You finally have a little down time with Jesus to talk about your own needs. But all of a sudden 5,000 people show up, and Jesus, the miracle worker, looks at you and says, "You had better run to the store."

An exasperated Philip says, "Jesus, it is not in the budget! If we had an extra six months wages, we still couldn't meet all this need." Philip is very much in touch with his limitations.

Meanwhile Andrew takes inventory and announces, "We've found a kid here who has five loaves and two fish." (To me this has always seemed like a huge lunch for one boy.) Realizing how ridiculous this report is, Andrew's voice trails off as he says, "But what are they among so many people?"

Seldom does a day go by that you are not confronted with a large crowd of human need. Daily our newspapers remind us of the crowds in Iraq and Afghanistan where violence seems to reign on the streets, the crowds in Sudan where the violence has led to starvation, the crowds in the Middle East that simply cannot find the path to peace, and the crowds even in our city who are struggling with poverty, floods, unemployment, and despair. When you put down the paper, there is Jesus staring at you asking the same question he put to Philip: "What are you going to do about this?"

So you respond by trying to help Jesus get a grasp on reality. "Look, these are huge, systemic problems, and I am just one of your average disciples. I don't have anything real spectacular here, just a little education and a little money, a few skills and lot of insecurity. The needs of the poor are complex, and the injustice of the world is overwhelming. For Pete's sake, I'm just an accountant. What can I do?"

Some of our sociologists have begun speaking about a phenomenon called Compassion Fatigue. It describes this feeling of being overwhelmed by social needs that do not get met. This fatigue is expressed by those who lament, "If I see one more picture of a starving child... If one more

person tells me what I ought to do, I'm going to scream. I'm tired of feeling bad that I cannot make a difference for the poor. I can't fix the world. I can't even fix my own life. I've just got five loaves and a couple of fish."

It is enough. It is even more than you need. "Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted... and there were twelve baskets left over."

Notice, Jesus took the five loaves and two fish and in front of thousands of hungry people, *he gave thanks*. I believe that is the most important phrase in this whole story. Jesus gave thanks for what he had. Then the miracle could begin. That's how powerful gratitude is.

The thing that distinguishes the disciples of Jesus in the world is not that they have happiness. Many non-Christians are very happy. We hate to admit that, but it is true. Nor are we distinctive by our success. Jesus certainly doesn't promise that. We aren't even distinctive by our mission. There are so many non-Christians who are devoted to doing very good things in the world. The thing that distinguishes those who follow Jesus through life is that they are grateful for what Jesus has done, is doing, and will do. We pay attention to even the quiet miracles that just keep happening when we place our lives in his hands. And we give thanks.

The reason gratitude is distinctive today is because we live in society that knows little of thanksgiving. We have become so preoccupied with the cherished self image of being the victim, it is as if we are all vying for the crown of thorns. For too long we have indulged ourselves with complaints about what our parents did to us, what the church did to us, what the government, employer, or accident did to us. None of us think we have enough. After all our hard work, we just have these lousy five loaves and two fish. But in the midst of this large, discontented, hungry crowd persists the image of Jesus holding up so little and giving thanks for what he has.

What we hunger for most of all is not new health, new jobs, or new relationships. Most of all we hunger for a new heart. And the only way to find one is to stop looking at the inadequacy of what you have and look instead at the miracles Jesus can do with it.

It is striking that Jesus does not create bread for these people to eat. Instead, he multiplies the bread and fish he is given by an anonymous boy. It is Jesus who fixes the world. But he isn't going to feed the hungry, house the homeless, or give jobs to the poor by creating those things out of thin air. No, he is going to multiply what you give him. That's the way the miracle works, or doesn't work. It depends on what you give him.

To this day there persists a raging debate between liberal and conservative scholars as to whether there really was a miracle here, or did Jesus' example just teach the people to start sharing the food everyone was hiding in their cloaks. I believe Jesus really performed the miracle, but frankly that is easy. If I can believe in the resurrection, this one is a piece of cake. When it comes to the miracles of Jesus, the real question is not did it happen but does it happen?

Will Jesus take your limited resources, and in his hands make the miracle happen again? Will Jesus feed the hungry of our world and build homes for our homeless? Will he use this church to console the grieving, comfort the sick, form faith in our children, conduct worship for generations to come, and build the kingdom of God in Pittsburgh? With what we have? It would take a miracle.

Maybe. But that is a Savior's worry. Our calling is simply to take what we have, place it in the Savior's hands, and give thanks. Can you do that? Can you give up your little argument with the inadequacy of life? Can you become thankful for what you have and see it as a means of making a world of difference? If not, then it may be best to hang onto all of your money because you are going to need it and whole lot more to keep the hungry world from your door. But if you are tired of being a victim, and tired of your own complaints, then you just have to recover your created identity of being a giver.

Invest what you are holding in hope. It will change your life. And maybe that is the real miracle Jesus has been after all along. Amen.