

John 6: 1-21

IN THE 1920'S, THERE WAS A YOUNG WOMAN NAMED AGNES WHO BELIEVED SHE WAS HEARING A CALL FROM GOD TO ENTER INTO MINISTRY AS A GLOBAL MISSIONARY. SHE WAS ONLY 12 AT THE TIME, BUT SHE HAD GROWN UP LISTENING TO STORIES ABOUT SAINTS, AND THE MEN AND WOMEN SHE HEARD ABOUT QUICKLY BECAME HER IDOLS. SHE WANTED TO IMITATE THEM, AND WITH THE HELP OF HER MOTHER, THEY OFTEN DID. AGNES AND HER MOTHER WOULD HOST THE POOREST MEMBERS OF THEIR COMMUNITY AT THEIR FAMILY DINNERS MOST NIGHTS, AND WHEN LOOKING BACK, AGNES RECALLED HER MOTHER TELLING HER THAT THEY SHOULD NEVER EAT A SINGLE MOUTHFUL UNLESS THEY WERE SHARING MEALS WITH OTHERS. "THEY MAY NOT BE OUR RELATIONS," SHE SAID, "BUT ALL OF THEM ARE OUR PEOPLE."

THIS LESSON REMAINED WITH AGNES LONG AFTER HER CHILDHOOD, AND WHEN SHE TURNED 18, SHE FOLLOWED THROUGH ON HER SENSE OF CALL TO LEAVE HOME AND BECOME A MISSIONARY. SHE WAS UNUSUALLY SHORT FOR HER AGE—NEVER EVEN REACHING FIVE FEET TALL—AND SHE HAD NEVER BEEN OUTSIDE OF HER HOME COUNTRY. BUT DESPITE HER SMALL STATURE AND KNOWING NOTHING ABOUT WHERE SHE'D BE SENT, SHE BELIEVED THAT GOD WAS CALLING HER TO DO IMPORTANT WORK IN THE WORLD.

IN 1928, SHE LEFT HOME AND STUDIED ENGLISH IN IRELAND FOR A FEW MONTHS BEFORE BEING SENT BY HER RELIGIOUS ORDER TO INDIA—A COUNTRY SHE HAD READ ABOUT IN BOOKS BUT HAD NEVER EXPERIENCED IN PERSON. AGNES BEGAN WORK AS A TEACHER IN A SCHOOLHOUSE NEAR THE CONVENT WHERE SHE LIVED, AND SHE SOON DISCOVERED THAT SHE HAD A NATURAL GIFT FOR TEACHING. THE CLASSROOM WAS A TRUE GIFT TO HER, AND EVEN AFTER SHE BECAME A NUN A FEW YEARS LATER, SHE REMAINED CLOSELY INVOLVED WITH EDUCATION OVER THE NEXT DECADE. IN 1937, SHE WAS ASSIGNED TO A SCHOOL IN EASTERN CALCUTTA AND WAS SO SUCCESSFUL DURING HER TIME THAT SHE BECAME HEADMISTRESS OF THE ENTIRE SCHOOL.

IT WAS EASY TO IMAGINE THAT THIS WAS THE LIFE THAT GOD HAD CALLED HER TO LIVE: SHE WAS SUCCESSFUL AND BELOVED AT THE SCHOOL, AND HER LIFE WAS SECURE. BUT ON HER DAILY COMMUTE TO AND FROM THE SCHOOL, AGNES WITNESSED INCREDIBLE POVERTY ON THE STREETS OF CALCUTTA, AND THE OUTBREAK OF SEVERE FAMINE LEFT TENS OF THOUSANDS IN THE CITY WITHOUT FOOD. WRACKED BY GUILT AND A NEED TO HELP, AGNES LEFT HER HEADMISTRESS POSITION AT HER SCHOOL IN 1948 TO TRY AND MINISTER TO THE POOR, NOT JUST THOSE WHO COULD AFFORD AN EDUCATION.

BUT WHILE HER PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE AT FOLLOWING GOD'S CALL HAD LED HER INTO IMMEDIATE SUCCESS, MINISTERING DIRECTLY TO THE POOR PROVED TO BE MORE OF A CHALLENGE THAN SHE HAD EVER EXPERIENCED. AFTER A YEAR, SHE FOUND HERSELF ALMOST COMPLETELY BROKE, AND SHE WAS FORCED TO BEG FOR FOOD AND SUPPLIES FROM HER FORMER FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES.

HER ONCE UNFLAPPABLE CONVICTIONS HAD BEEN SHAKEN, AND IN HER DIARY SHE WROTE ABOUT THE SHARP TEMPTATION SHE FELT TO GIVE UP AND RETURN TO THE SCHOOL TO

TEACH. SHE FELT LIKE EVERYTHING SHE HAD TO GIVE WAS NOT ENOUGH. WHAT WERE HER SMALL EFFORTS OF CHARITY AMONG SO MANY PEOPLE WHO WERE IN NEED? WHAT GOOD WERE THE SMALL MEALS THAT SHE SHARED AMONG THE ENTIRE CITY THAT WAS STRUGGLING WITH HUNGER?

THAT WAS EXACTLY THE DILEMMA FACING JESUS AND THE DISCIPLES IN OUR GOSPEL PASSAGE FROM JOHN. THE FEEDING OF THE 5,000 IS THE ONLY MIRACLE OTHER THAN THE RESURRECTION TO BE RECORDED IN ALL FOUR OF THE GOSPELS. THE ONLY MIRACLE OTHER THAN THE RESURRECTION TO BE RECORDED IN ALL 4 GOSPELS.

AS THE CROWDS COME FORWARD FROM THEIR TRAVELS, JESUS ASKS PHILIP WHERE THEY CAN BUY BREAD FOR THESE PEOPLE TO EAT. IT WAS A GREAT JOKE ON JESUS' PART, BECAUSE THE TEXT SAYS THAT JESUS KNEW EXACTLY WHAT HE WAS GOING TO DO, BUT ONE CAN IMAGINE THE FEAR IN PHILIP'S EYES AS HE REALIZES THEY ARE ABOUT TO HAVE A LOT OF HUNGRY, ANGRY PEOPLE ON THEIR HANDS. IN JOHN'S ACCOUNT, PHILIP HOPELESSLY REPLIES THAT BUYING BREAD WOULD BE A NEAR IMPOSSIBILITY FOR THEM. AFTER ALL, THEY THEMSELVES WERE LIKELY FORCED TO RELY ON THE GENEROSITY OF OTHERS AS MUCH AS THE PEOPLE WHO WERE COMING TO THEM. SO WHEN ANDREW REPORTS THAT THEIR ONLY FOOD SOURCE IS THE BOY WITH THE FIVE LOAVES AND TWO FISHES, THE SITUATION SEEMS LIKE IT HAS THE POTENTIAL TO GO WELL BEYOND THE WORST CHURCH POTLUCK EVER ASSEMBLED.

IN THE FACE OF ALL THIS POTENTIAL HUNGER, ANDREW LOOKS DOWN AT THE 5 LOAVES AND 2 FISHES THAT THE BOY HAS PLACED BEFORE THEM AND ASKS, "WHAT ARE THEY AMONG SO MANY PEOPLE?" IT WAS A GENEROUS GIFT TO BE CERTAIN—THE BOY COULD HAVE KEPT THE FOOD FOR HIMSELF AND FOR HIS FAMILY; OR GIVEN HIS FOOD WITH STIPULATIONS; BUT CHOSE INSTEAD TO SHARE IT WITH ALL OF THE PEOPLE. BUT THE BASIC RULES OF MATH STILL APPLY: WHAT ARE 7 ITEMS OF FOOD AMONG 5,000 PEOPLE? WHAT BIT OF DIFFERENCE WOULD THAT MAKE?

MANY OF US WRESTLE WITH THAT VERY QUESTION AS WE LOOK AT OUR SOCIETY. HUNGER IS STILL A PERVASIVE PROBLEM AROUND THE WORLD, AS IS AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND ACCESS TO CLEAN WATER. WE ARE ALL TOO AWARE THAT THERE ARE MILLIONS OF PEOPLE IN DESPERATE NEED OF HELP IN THE FORM OF MEETING BASIC NEEDS. IT'S PART OF WHAT MOTIVATES FAITH COMMUNITIES TO MAKE AN IMPACT.

BUT WHILE WE KNOW IT IS THE CHRISTIAN THING TO DO AS WE DONATE OUR TIME AND RESOURCES TO COMBATING THINGS LIKE HUNGER OR POVERTY, THERE'S STILL A SMALL VOICE WITHIN THAT GNAWS AT US AND SAYS THE MATH DOESN'T ADD UP.

WHEN THE BOY BROUGHT 5 LOAVES AND 2 FISHES TO ANDREW, THEY WERE REALISTICALLY NOT VERY MUCH FOR A CROWD OF 5,000. AND YET THROUGH GOD'S LOVE AND GRACE, THERE WAS SOMEHOW AN ABUNDANCE, AND EVERYONE WAS ABLE TO BE FED. OVER THE YEARS I HAVE HEARD PREACHERS TRY TO EXPLAIN AWAY THIS MIRACLE SAYING THE BOY'S KINDHEARTED GESTURE PROMPTED OTHERS TO GIVE WHAT THEY HAD AS WELL, WHICH EXPLAINS WHY THERE WAS ENOUGH FOOD. BUT THIS IGNORES THE WIDER POINT OF THE

MIRACLE STORY. THROUGH CHRIST, WE CAN GIVE WHOLEHEARTEDLY OF OURSELVES WITHOUT FEELING A SENSE OF DOUBT CREEPING IN THAT ALL OUR EFFORTS WILL BE FOR NAUGHT...AND LIKE THE STORY OF JESUS WALKING ON WATER THAT IS CURIOUSLY ALWAYS COUPLED WITH THE FEEDING OF THE 5,000, WE KNOW THAT GOD WILL BE WITH US EVEN IN THE MOMENTS WHEN WE ARE AFRAID OR THINGS LOOK PARTICULARLY HOPELESS. WE HAVE EACH BEEN GIVEN A VARIETY OF GIFTS FOR A REASON, AND THROUGH GOD WE BELIEVE OUR GIFTS WILL BEAR GREAT FRUIT—EVEN BEYOND WHAT WE’RE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND OR SEE IN THE MOMENT, AND EVEN IN THOSE MOMENTS WHEN WE ARE FILLED WITH SELF-DOUBT ABOUT HOW MUCH OF AN IMPACT WE’LL TRULY BE ABLE TO HAVE.

AFTER HER FIRST YEAR, AGNES CONTINUED TO STRUGGLE WITH HER CALL, AND SHE FELT LIKE ALL OF HER CONTRIBUTIONS HADN’T MADE THE SLIGHTEST BIT OF DIFFERENCE TO THE POOR LIVING IN CALCUTTA. BUT IN 1950, TWO YEARS AFTER SHE HAD LEFT HER POSITION AS HEADMISTRESS AT HER FORMER SCHOOL, SHE RECEIVED A GRANT FROM THE VATICAN TO BEGIN A CONGREGATION THAT WOULD LATER BE KNOWN AS THE MISSIONARIES OF CHARITY. BY THE 1960’S THEY HAD OPENED UP ORPHANAGES, HOSPICES, AND COMMUNITIES ALL ACROSS INDIA, AND AGNES’S REPUTATION HAD GROWN THROUGHOUT THE WORLD. KNOWN TO MOST AS MOTHER TERESA, THE NAME SHE TOOK AS A CATHOLIC NUN, AGNES’S SERVICE TO GOD AND TO THE POOR GREW FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS TO A MOVEMENT ESTIMATED TO HAVE OVER 5,000 SISTERS TODAY. I DOUBT THIS WAS SOMETHING SHE HAD PLANNED ON. SHE WAS ONLY DOING WHAT THAT BOY WAS DOING: GIVING THE LOAVES HE HAD, WHILE WISHING FOR SOMETHING MORE. GIVING WITH NO STRINGS ATTACHED.

A FAVORITE PRAYER OF MINE PUTS IT LIKE THIS: MAY GOD BLESS YOU WITH ENOUGH FOOLISHNESS TO BELIEVE THAT YOU REALLY CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THIS WORLD, SO THAT YOU ARE ABLE, THROUGH GOD’S GRACE, TO DO WHAT OTHERS THINK CANNOT BE DONE.”

FRIENDS, WHEN OUR DOUBTS ARE CREEPING IN AND WE START TO THINK THAT ALL OUR EFFORSTS WON’T BE ENOUGH TO CHANGE THINGS THAT SEEM UTTERLY BEYOND OUR CONTROL, I TRULY HOPE WE CAN BE BLESSED WITH ENOUGH FOOLISHNESS TO BELIEVE THAT WE ARE INDEED MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THIS WORLD—AND LIKE THE BOY OFFERING WHAT LITTLE HE HAD TO THE CROWD OF 5,000, OUR IMPACT WILL EXTEND BEYOND WHAT WE COULD EVER IMAGINE, THROUGH GOD’S LOVE AND GRACE. THANKS BE TO GOD FOR THE THAT CHALLENGE IN OUR LIVES. AMEN.

