



Over One Billion Served

Sermon Series: Better Together: 40 Days of Community

Sunday, October 7, 2007
Serving Together

Rev. Dr. David E. Gilbert
Scripture Lesson: John 6:1-15

I've got a question for you this morning.

How many of you eat at MacDonald's?
(Raise your hand).

When's the last time you ate at a MacDonald's? When's the last time you had a "Big Mac?"

MacDonald's is of course one of the ultimate success stories. I'm always interested to look at that number you see printed in gold below the MacDonald's golden arches. The one that says "Over sixty billion served" or "Over ninety billion served", depending on how recently you checked.

The McDonalds franchises have served billions of hamburgers and billions of people and it really is an incredible story. I'm not going to go into that, but if you know the MacDonald's story you know that along the way (after two brothers – the MacDonald brothers – launched the initial MacDonald's restaurant in California) came a gentleman by the name of Ray Kroc. Ray Kroc was a milkshake machine salesman. He entered the picture and when he saw what the MacDonald brothers were doing in terms of a quick item menu he said, "This will go anyplace!"

And with that he sold them their first shake machine and he began to franchise

MacDonald's restaurants literally all over the country and eventually all over the world.

Today over a million hamburgers are sold daily by MacDonald's.

Well, this morning we're going to open up a familiar passage of Jesus feeding a crowd – not a billion, but some 5000 men and women and children – without assembly lines, without franchises, -- but with a plan – a plan to help those people understand who Jesus is and why He had come. But before we open our bibles I want you to be thinking as we read not only about the 5000 plus that Jesus served, but about the multitudes of people – the hundreds, the thousands, – that all of us collectively encounter each day and are called to serve.

Alright, find a bible in your pew, and turn with me to the Gospel of John, chapter 6, beginning at verse 1. I invite you to listen to God's Word.

6After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ²A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷Philip answered him, 'Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' ⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹'There is a

boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?' ¹⁰Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹Then 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. ¹²When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.' ¹³So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.

¹⁴When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'

¹⁵When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Well, people had been following Jesus around a good bit of time – in fact, all of His ministry. Many were curious, but others had physical needs and they came for specific reasons. They wanted to be healed and of course everyone came with a spiritual need.

I love what the scripture says. It says that Jesus can't get away from the people. He can't get away from that crowd. Even when He crosses the Sea of Galilee to be with His disciples the people follow Him because the people want to be near Jesus.

Matthew's account of this same text Matthew has this telling line: Matthew says, "*When Jesus saw the people he had compassion on them.*"

He looked up and He had compassion on the people. He knew that they needed to come for healing. He knew that they were going to be hungry. And He had compassion on the people.

Many of you know I had a Kidney Stone attack last weekend. Cathy took me to the emergency room. I was in agony and as I looked at her I could almost see her heart pounding, pumping hard as she talked to the intake person at the ER room and as she cared for me. Why was she so revved up? Because one of the most important things in her life – me – was in great pain! She would have done anything in her power to get me help as fast as she could. Her heart was beating fast for me.

I.

God wants our hearts to beat fast for the things that matter most to Him. When Jesus saw the people coming towards Him He had compassion on them. His heart beat faster and He wanted the disciples to join Him in loving and caring for those people. Jesus wanted all those seekers who were coming to Him to be with Him. And He wanted the disciples to see with His eyes, and to love what He loved, and to serve whom He served.

And Jesus still wants that from us. He wants us to look up, but boy that's hard to do some times, isn't it? – To look up and see, --NOTICE, -- the people around us – in their hunger and their need. We're so busy, we're so distracted, we have so many things to do, we've got our own problems -- that we just don't see people oftentimes, --- that we just don't "look up" and see the human need that's staring us in the face.

Staring us in the face across our dinner table, or in the troubled look of a child at middle school or at high school. Or in the silence of a colleague at work, -- silence that speaks out some hidden but deep anguish inside.

These are needs. People with needs. And we need to pay attention, to "look up" as Jesus did, and see as Jesus did....with compassion.

But as this is World Communion Sunday I let's think specifically about the human need of our wider world. Close to home in Youngstown. But also in South Chicago. In Nairobi. In the Sudan. In Darfur. In Afghanistan and in Palestine. In the Congo. In Burma and what's been happening there this past week as the military dictatorship there has sought to ruthlessly crush pro-democracy protests.

We know that we should be concerned about the very real human need of very real people in such places, but we've got our own needs, our own concerns. We come home at the end of the day after a long day at work and we're tired. We just want to "veg out" in front of the TV and if something comes dealing, say, with the growing humanitarian crisis in

the Congo, we may easily flip to the next channel – where there’s a rerun of Seinfeld.

I saw a TV commercial this past week that really grabbed me. It first looked like it was a brokerage advertisement. It showed a broker sitting down with a man and a woman to review their stock portfolio. The broker says, “It has been a good year for you. Your technology stocks have performed well, and your small cap funds have done great also. And you’ve been making a real killing in human extermination as well.” The couple looks shocked, and then the screen fades to black. And then a caption comes on the screen: “Do you know how your mutual funds are being invested? Are they being invested in ways that support human extermination in Darfur?” Well, that got my attention!

Whatever the need, whatever the appeal (whether it be a son’s, a daughter’s, a grandchild’s question, or an appeal on behalf of perfect strangers halfway around the world from us, our compassion, our service starts with “looking up,” with noticing, -- seeing with Jesus’ eyes of compassion.

How are you doing there?

II.

But seeing and having compassion – looking up and noticing – is only the first step. Jesus didn’t just want the disciples to notice the people coming to Him; He didn’t just want them to have compassion on them. Jesus also wanted them to *act out their compassion*to get up and do something!

We can sympathize with the disciples, can’t we? The presenting need before them (this crowd of people and their hunger) seems so great and their resources so small. There’s no Giant Eagle just around the corner for them to run to. And even the money that they have --- well, what difference could it possibly make among so many?

Philip said what was probably on all their minds, “We could work all year Jesus and we wouldn’t have enough money to buy them a Crispy Crème doughnut and a cup of coffee. What do you expect, Jesus? What do you expect?”

Well, Jesus expects something. Something of them, and something of us. And Andrew, sensing this, speaks up. He says that there’s a boy present who has at least some food. And that’s how we feel, don’t we – in the face of the enormous human need around us? We’ve got just this little stuff, pocket change, really. Nothing much. *But just maybe in Jesus’ hands.....????*

And Jesus takes those few loaves of barley bread – the cheapest kind of bread back then --coarse – small --and two fish (more like sardines than snapper you might want to eat) --- He takes those five little loaves and those two little fish and He blesses them. And He begins to give the people the food.

And you know the rest of the story. There’s an “all you can eat feast.” Every one ends up being served; everyone ends up being filled; everyone ends up being satisfied....such that when Jesus asks the disciples to pick up the leftovers, there are not just a few leftover scraps, but twelve full baskets of leftovers! I guess

each disciple had a basket and they went around getting the leftovers.

And in that moment the second miracle of this story occurs: the people see the glory of God. They see the heart of Jesus. They are amazed at what they see. And they begin to understand a little bit of who Jesus is.

Friends, when we serve people – offer up what we have to meet their need -- whether it's walking in the Crop Hunger Walk or taking "Meals on Wheels" to homebound people, or being a reading buddy to some kids in a Youngstown Elementary School or pounding nails in a Habitat for Humanity house or giving dollars to the United Way ---we do it not just for the sake of kindness; we do it not just so that their need is taken care of. We do it so that people may see Jesus, that they may see Jesus in our service. – that they may see the glory of God, – see the provision that comes when Christ works through people like us – and be amazed.

We can't take on every need of course, but we can care, and we can do what we can, where we can, and how we can.

A great story is told of Francis of Assisi. One day Francis invited a young monk to go with him out into town to preach. The young man was excited. He was excited because he got to go with Francis. He was excited because he was going to get to preach to the community. And all day long he and Francis were out in the town.

They walked through the streets, the allies, and the byways. They rubbed shoulders with hundreds of people, and at the end of the day the two headed

home. Not once had Francis addressed the crowd. And going home the young monk was very distraught. He said, "I thought we were going into town to preach!"

And at that point Francis said something very powerful to the young monk. He said, "My son, we have preached. We were preaching while we were walking. We were seen by many and our behavior was closely watched. *It is of no use walking anywhere to preach unless we preach everywhere as we walk.*"

Hear that last line again: "*It is of no use walking anywhere to preach unless we preach everywhere as we walk.*"

Friends, Jesus wants us not just to *talk* about love; He wants us to *do* love. He wants us to live out our service in boardrooms and in classrooms, in homes and in nursing homes. He wants us to feed and clothe the poor. He wants us to "look up" and see the need with eyes of compassion, with His eyes. But then He also wants us to put that compassion into action....to get up and do something.....to offer what we have – even if it what we have to offer seems little in the face of the size of the need. In our hands what we have to offer may indeed be little. But in His hands our "little" has a way of becoming *much indeed* ---becoming an abundance!

I was over in Maumee, Ohio on Thursday and Friday for the annual meeting of the Synod of the Covenant. At the assembly the delegation of foreign missionaries were welcomed and gave welcome in turn. When I say "foreign missionaries" I mean Christians from other countries who have been brought over by our Synod to minister

among congregations in Michigan and Ohio over the next six weeks. I hope that we will have the opportunity to meet one of them during that time. These brothers and sisters are from Ethiopia, Zambia, Ghana, and South Africa. One after one they shared the phenomenal growth of the Presbyterian-related churches they hail from in the last century, now numbering 14 million in Ethiopia, and similarly high numbers in the other countries. Each of them expressed sincere appreciation for how Presbyterian missionaries from Switzerland, and Scotland, and America labored, and served to bring Christianity – hospitals, and mission schools and the gospel -- to their people. And now these churches far outnumber our own denomination and the others from which they were sprung.

Friends, what we have to offer the world (as Ray Kroc said) “will go anyplace.” Literally billions around the world are being served in the name of Christ, and we are a part of it – or can be!

Join me in prayer:

Father in heaven, we love you and we want to serve, but we confess that we have a hard time looking up. Help us see with the eyes of Jesus. Help us serve as He would have us. Use what we have to make a difference, to feed others, even as we have been fed and continue so to be by your loving provision. We give you our heartfelt thanks as we make ready to share in the supper Jesus so richly provides for us....and for all who trust and who call on His name. Amen.