

Do you ever get a headache from caffeine deprivation, or sometimes your blood sugar gets a little low and you feel a little faint? How many times, do you find you need a sugar or salt fix? These things happen to me. /

I don't think I've ever been hungry. By hungry, I don't mean merely a growling stomach; I'm talking about when your body starts to actually cannibalize itself in order to keep itself alive. I get peckish or even hangry, to the point I may say something like "I'm starving!" The reality is, ours is the only culture that I can think of, that can open a fridge that is pouring forth food like a cornucopia and say there is nothing to eat. What culture would take vows in the middle of winter to go on a diet? Think about that: no culture in the whole history of the world has decided to deprive themselves of food in the middle of winter, except ours. We are often a stuffed culture with food to spare to the point that it gets wasted. /(1)

As most of you know I worked in retail for 25 years prior to becoming a pastor. Part of the job, especially on the grocery side of stores, would be to check dates and to cull the fresh food. Fruits and vegetables would get spotty or start to get over ripe and we would throw them out. Day old bread would get tossed by the cart loads. Depending on location and retail chain, sometimes this product would get donated to food banks, shelters, places with a need. More often than not though, it would go in the trash. That's not quite the best culture: bread to spare; bread to waste. /

Jesus came into a world very different from that. He came from a world where people were two or three days away from starvation. It's no wonder that Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry, under the anointing of God, under the driving of the Holy Spirit, went into the desert and went without food and water for forty days. And to be sure, there's a whole bunch of stuff going on there—for one, Jesus was recapitulating the experience of Israel in the desert. But a fundamental reason Jesus went out in the desert was to know in his bones the world that he was ministering to. In the withering of his gut, the gauntness of his (2)

limbs, the faintness of his body, he got to know this world that is so hungry. And Jesus put that very idea at the center of the prayer he taught us to pray, "Give us this day this daily bread." That's how dependent that world was. No wonder Jesus Christ said, "I am the Bread of Life." He knew that was good news to the hungry world. (long pause)

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There are two miracles that all four gospels recount, and the feeding of the 5,000 is one of them. Because of this fact, I think some background from Matthew, Mark, and Luke are helpful. First, Matthew and Mark have two separate reasons why Jesus and his disciples went out into the wilderness. According to Matthew, it's because they're grief-stricken. They've just received the news that Herod has taken the head off of John the Baptist. They received the news, so Jesus decides they should find a solitary place. John was Jesus' cousin and forerunner of the king. At least Andrew, if not more of the disciples, followed John the Baptist before they followed Jesus. (pause) /

I assume they were all, sad, grief-stricken, and hurting from this really, really hard news? It's likely they wanted/needed some time to (3)

grieve. Jesus understood that and determines that they all need some down time—some time away from other people to just be a family.

(pause) /

Mark gives us a different reason for Jesus and his disciples going into the wilderness, namely, that ministry has been nuts. They are exhausted. It says in Mark's gospel that so many people were coming and going that the disciples themselves did not have time to eat. So, Jesus tells them they have to come with him to get some rest. (pause) If you have ever been exhausted, where you just feel like everybody is demanding a piece of you and your time and energy, you know exactly what I'm talking about. And if somebody said, "Go and take a little holiday," what good news that would be! Mark says that that's why Jesus and his disciples go out in the wilderness. So they get there, and guess who else is there in the wilderness? Five thousand men. That number doesn't even include the women and children who are there, too. If that had happened to us, it's likely we would feel annoyed and irritated? I have a lot of empathy for these guys because when my (4)

heart is broken and my back is breaking, I just want to clear out for a while. /

According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the disciples are watching this all unfold, and Jesus' response to the crowd is to have compassion on them. I'm thinking that the disciples are feeling something other than compassion. Maybe contempt, frustration, annoyance, anger, resentment, bitterness, but I don't think they're feeling compassion. By the way, it's interesting that Jesus does two things before he feeds crowd. According to the compassion he feels, the first thing he does is he heals those who are sick. The second thing he does is he teaches them; they are to him sheep without a shepherd—they are lost, scared, and vulnerable. And while one of the gospels says that Jesus taught them many things, another specifies that he taught them about the kingdom of God. That's a compassionate response because to the hunger and brokenness and weariness of people—there's a kingdom of God, and you don't have to have money, and you don't have to be talented, and you don't even have to have been good to be a part of it, is absolutely amazing. You just have to want it. / (5)

Jesus knows that these are people oppressed by kingdoms. They're crossed by the kingdom of Rome and the kingdom of Herod--these whimsical, capricious, tyrannical kings who do whatever they want whenever they want, while they take your money. These people are oppressed by kingship, but they learn from Jesus that there's a good king on the watch, on the move, and they can come into his kingdom. That's compassion. (pause) /

But it starts to get late, and the disciples are starting to see the trajectory of the gathering, because the sun is going down and they're far from civilization. Where the heck are these people going to get food? So according to the other gospels the disciples approach Jesus and basically say, "We like these people, but we think it's time to wrap it up and send them home. They must be getting hungry. There's probably a town nearby where they can get something to eat." And Jesus says, 'You feed them. Yeah, you.' (long pause) /

Now, John tells the story a little differently than Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It's not contradictory, but in John's version of this, Jesus initiates a conversation about food. He asks Philip, "Where shall we (6)

buy bread for these people to eat?" It's Jesus who initiates it. And then John provides this little side note: "He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do." Philip answers like this: "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite." /

That little conversation between Jesus and Philip is one of the hinge pieces of this entire story. Jesus is asking a question at one level, and Philip answers it at another level. Jesus is asking a where question. It's a faith question. And Philip answers with a how response. He heard Jesus' question a budget question—a logistics or strategy question. /

Those are two different ways to have this conversation. I think that many of us are missing Christ's invitation to join him in God's mission in this broken world, because when he asks a where question we answer with a how response. Sometimes we miss a chance to further the kingdom of God because we get stuck on the how instead of focusing on the where. Our goal is to be willing to answer the where. /

Instead of asking how, we say, "Here I am, send me." In our scripture today, Jesus asks the where question, and there's one kid in (7)

the whole group who's willing say, "Here I am, send me." Andrew still wants to bicker over the how, but Jesus is uninterested in that conversation. He's got what he needs—one boy willing to step forward and make a sacrifice of what he has for the sake of what Jesus is up to. All Jesus needs is one person to say yes and make a sacrifice toward it. That's it. He doesn't need twenty people. He doesn't say, "Okay, if we can just get ten more." It's amazing what will happen if just one person with faith will take what they have and give it. What an act of trust that is. (pause) /

I don't know about you, but even though I've never been hungry, I like eating, and if I was the one kid in a hoard of 5,000 with enough foresight to pack lunch, I might be making an excuse why I had to slip out of there. But this boy gets it. Jesus already knows what he wants to do, so the boy makes a sacrifice. He gets started with one boy's willingness, and the kingdom really breaks out as the disciples then start to step up to distribute the food. The people get to see a visible demonstration of what Jesus has just been teaching them. You see, the kingdom only needs two things: it needs someone to say, "Yes, I will (8)

sacrifice what I have," and it needs people willing to then say, "Okay, I'm in on this," and to start serving. (long pause) /

That's why Paul says in Philippians 2:17, "Even if I'm being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you." Why does he say that? He's basically saying, "Wherever I see sacrifice and wherever I see service, whenever I see people willing to give up the little they have for the thing that God has got in his head to do, I know that as I give of myself too, the kingdom of God goes forward." /

When we are able to say "Yes, God," then we play a role in helping God's kingdom move forward. Setting aside our temptation to make excuses, reduce the kingdom of God to our own strategy, to our perceived capacity, to our resources—and just saying yes to God, as impractical as it may seem, we discover three things happen. /

One, everybody gets what they want. The text says that everybody gets as much to eat as they want. Two, nothing gets wasted. That's part of the story. And three, there's more than we need—there's more than enough. (pause) / (9)

I believe that Jesus Christ is speaking to us as a church, and I think we've seen some of the ministries he's already opened up through a Yes, God spirit. I don't think we've even begun to see what God has in mind to do. I don't think we've seen the sweep and the scope of the things that God has in mind to do, and I don't think we will see it until we say, Yes, God. Every one of us is going to have opportunities where Jesus Christ is going to confront you personally and ask you a where question. It will seem nutty most of the time—crazy, hair-brained, and impractical. But if you reduce it to those things at the outset, you may miss the whole thing. If that boy hadn't stepped forward, where would this story have gone? Thankfully, he answered with a, "I don't get it; it doesn't make sense to me, but here I am. Here I am." The more you live into that, the more you get all you want, you have enough, nothing's wasted, and there's stuff left over. /

////// That's why I think the story ends the way it does: it ends oddly. People are so impressed with Jesus that they want to make him king by force. They want him to be what they have in mind for him to be. And I see that tendency in my own flesh all the time: I think that Jesus is (10)

around to do what I have in mind for him to do. I want to point out in the story that Jesus isn't much interested in that kind of kingship. /

Rather, he comes to men and women every day and asks this question:

Where can I find one person willing to join me in what I'm doing in this hungry world? Will it be you saying, "Here I am. I don't know how this is going to work, but I don't need to know. You already know what you want to do, so here I am. Send me. Use me. Here's what I have."

(pause) /

May that be so. Amen.