

“Lessons Learned from this Recession”

Week 3: Making Do with Less

Texts: 1st Kings 17:7-16; John 6:1-15

I trust that every one enjoyed their 4th of July celebration. Some of you might have even celebrated by visiting family or friends or the lake or the big city of Omaha or Kansas City. Chances are that you got in your car this 4th of July weekend and might have had to fill up the car or truck with gas. Anyone know what the price of gas is running these days? According to some gas stations, gas can be as high as \$2.75/gallon. Any idea what the price of gas was selling last 4th of July? Believe it or not, the national average last year was \$4.11/gallon. With gas at record highs last year, many Americans celebrated the 4th closer to home. Not surprisingly, this wasn't the only change in consumer habits observed by economists when the price of gas rose above \$4.00 a gallon.

Many Americans like yourselves were forced to cut back on the non essential discretionary spending as disposable income shrunk next to nothing or less than nothing cutting into the basics like what you spend on weekly groceries. How many of you cut back on things like going out to restaurants or to the movies or what you spend on coffee at places like Starbucks or the Mill? I know at the Johnston household we had to cut back on all the above and even had to say to our kids that dreaded word, “No!” “No, we can not afford that right now.” Catherine even shifted from going to Blockbuster to rent a movie to checking out a movie from the library. Granted the movies we watched were not the latest releases at Blockbuster or NetFlix but they were entertaining just the same.

We saw one movie from the library entitled *The Twelve Dogs of Christmas* that wasn't a Walt Disney oldie like Old Yellow but it was about dogs and how a kid's love for his dog and all dogs saved them from the evil Mayor who had the audacity to outlaw dogs from his town. The acting was so bad that it was comical and very entertaining in an odd way. That Friday night at the movies cost us approximately \$2.00 dollars, the price of microwave popcorn.

What we discovered from eating more meals around the dinner table, having game night or movie night at home is that sometimes less is more. Have you discovered the same thing? Less can be more when it provides clarity of focus, helping you discern from what is essential for well being from that which is non essential. Less can be more when it promotes the importance of family, as families are forced to communicate less with electronic devices when miles apart and more face-to-face across the dinner table or the scrabble board. And, last but not least, less can be more when it fosters a dependence upon God to give us our daily bread.

This was certainly true for the biblical characters in our Old and New Testament this morning. In our Old Testament lesson from 1st Kings, Elijah and the widow from Zarephath learn this valuable lesson when less is more when it comes to trusting in God to give them their daily bread. You will recall that a famine has come upon the land of Israel because Ahab, the king of Israel, refuses to listen to Yahweh's prophet—Elijah. Instead, Ahab listens to his wife, Jezebel, who coincidentally is from Zarephath, a town in Philistine territory. Jezebel leads Ahab's heart away from the worship of Yahweh to the worship of idols that have not the power to save. To prove this point to Ahab, Elijah shuts up the heavens from rain causing a drought and famine in the land. Things get so bad that Elijah must depend upon the Ravens, a bird of prey, to feed him as commanded by Yahweh.

Now the word has come to Elijah to go to Zarephath, Jezebel's hometown and seek out a widow for his next meal. Elijah finds such a widow getting ready to prepare her last meal for her and her son. It seems that the heavens have been shut up in Zarephath as well. With the flour jar about to be empty with this last meal of cakes, she can not believe the request of this man of God. Give her last cake to Elijah... so much for a last meal... before starvation and death sets in. And yet this man of God promises that if she but trust in the Word of the Lord, her flour will never run out till it rains again.

Suddenly, the widow is confronted with competing worldviews which look at the problem of less differently. The powers of this world as symbolized through the likes of Jezebel and Ahab believe that less is less and that the appropriate response to scarcity is to hoard and hold on to what little you have. It matters not that the powers at be have more than they need, their fear of losing what they have causes them

to hoard and not to share with those in need. But to those who believe that less can be more when we learn to share what little we have discover the theology of abundance.

Suddenly, the flour jar doesn't run dry. Suddenly, two loaves and five fish doesn't run out... it is more than enough to feed the five thousand in our New Testament lesson this morning. It matters not whether this miracle was a multiplication of the loaves through defying the laws of physics or through the touching of the human heart to cause everyone else there that day to give what little they had to feed the multitude. Either way less became more when people gave what little they had to those in need, trusting in God to multiply it so that everyone who ate was satisfied. This was true for Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. This was true for the little boy and the multitude on the green grass. And this is true for us as well.

This reminds me of a miracle my previous church experienced in the year 2000. We decided to celebrate the year of Jubilee by feeding the poor in our community with bread and the bread of life. We had \$5,000.00 dollars budgeted for outreach that year. The Session rightfully said that \$5,000.00 dollars would not be enough to feed 5,000 in our community a hot meal, a bag of groceries, a bag of clothes, and a bible as a way to give them bread as we sought to give them the Bread of Life. I said to the Session that this was true except that maybe God would have us act in faith like the boy with a sack lunch and trust God to multiply our efforts. We prayed about this and then began sharing with other churches in our community and non profits our vision. In the end, before it was all over, we had over 10 churches, 13 non profits, and 20 some businesses contribute to this event. All total we gave out over \$100,000.00 of donated goods to approximately 3,000 people who came to Jubilee 2000. And the best part was the community worship with the area churches, Catholic and Protestant, Evangelical and Liberal, English speaking and Spanish speaking giving thanks to God for being the true Bread of Life. Our faith that day was certainly strengthened as we discovered a biblical truth... that less can be more when we step out in faith for God to multiply our resources to meet human need.

Some might ask if we solved the world's problems that day and the answer would be "No." Sadly, the people who came back the next Saturday looking for bread once more missed the bigger lesson of trusting God for their daily bread. Just as the people in Jesus' day wanted to make him king so that they would have all their problems solved, so do we today want God to solve all our problems. The last thing we want is to live by faith. We prefer to live by sight, either in having everything given to us or in working for everything we have. But the last thing we want is to become dependent upon God and interdependent upon one another to meet our needs. It is as if we only know two ways of being in the world, co dependent or self reliant. Either way is an affront to God because God is left out of the picture. But to bring God in the picture is to be totally dependent upon God as we become interdependent upon one another to meet genuine needs.

Truly this recession presents great challenges and possibilities to discover the biblical secret of when less can be more. As individuals who claim to follow the Bread of Life, how will we respond when confronted with genuine need? Jesus looked on the crowd and had compassion, will we? Moreover, Jesus' compassion for the crowd caused him to say to his disciples, "You give them something to eat." And sadly the disciples' response is the same in every age, "What little we have is not enough!" And yet Jesus commands us to give it in faith, trusting in God to multiply it miraculously.

Will we? To do so is to take a leap of faith in believing that less can be more when ministry is at stake. What would our lives look like if we took this biblical lesson to heart? Would we be anxious about a lack of resources to meet our needs? Would we learn that total dependence upon God and interdependence upon one another is something to embrace rather than avoid? Let me be clear on this point, if we fail to do x, y, or z because we do not have enough money... it is because we first do not have enough faith to discover when less can be more. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.