

Parallel Paths: Blessed Are the Poor - Muhammad Yunus

John 6:1-14

Let's talk for a few minutes about that story we just read. Because here's what I think many of us do when we hear stories like this one: Whoever is reading the Scripture text for the day gets to about the third sentence, and we hear the words "large crowd" and "bread"; and some little switch goes off in our brains that says, "I know that story. Jesus feeds all the people with just a little bit of food, and all the hungry people get full, and everyone goes home with leftovers. Yep. I already know that one." And then something happens in our ears. They turn off. They close up, so they can't hear so well what happens in the space in between those first few words and the way the story comes out. But it's in between where all the interesting stuff happens, where the real characters and the drama take place. It's like *Law and Order*, on television. Every episode of that show comes out pretty much the same, but people kept watching it—like 27 hours a week or so—because each time, there are new characters, and it's always interesting to find out who they are.

So today I want to live in the middle of this story about Jesus for a few minutes. I especially want to know more about this little boy who, the story tells us, happened to be there with five barley loaves and two fish, and was willing to give them to the disciples, so that they could be shared.

Who was that little boy? Was he there by himself, or with his family? Let's imagine for a moment that he was there by himself. Because I'm thinking that if he had had adults with him, they might have told him not to offer that food up. Adults are cautious. Children are generous. Maybe this little boy—let's call him Charlie—wasn't too far from home. It was a summer day, and his mother was busy doing the wash, or whatever else she did on Mondays, and she sent him out to play for the whole day, and said, "Be home by 5:00." Maybe he was on his way to see his cousins who lived a few miles away, and his mother had said, "Don't stop and talk to anyone on the way," but Charlie got distracted when he saw the big crowd following Jesus up the hill.

So Charlie's there in the middle of a big crowd of people—5,000, the Bible tells us, and some scholars say it was probably way more than that, because in those days they didn't even count women and children; they only counted the men. And it's kind of fun—sort of like a giant picnic, with people sitting down, and some standing; and they're listening to Jesus talk. But I'm guessing Charlie isn't paying too much attention, because it's kind of boring for kids to listen to adults talk, even if it is Jesus. So maybe he's tossing a rock back and forth to another kid in the crowd, whose parents keep saying "Shhhh!" and, "I told you a hundred times already, sit down!"

And then even the adults start to get a little restless, because they've been sitting there for a few hours now, and they're getting hungry. They hadn't planned on staying so long; they hadn't imagined that Jesus would say so many things that seemed important, or even interesting.

And Charlie happens to be in a spot pretty close to the front, where he can hear Jesus having a little side conversation with the assistants who came with him. "We have to feed these people,"

Jesus says. “I can tell they’re hungry. Where’s the nearest grocery store?” Philip says back to him, “Are you kidding? There’s no way we can buy lunch for everyone here! If I had a whole month’s rent in my pocket, I couldn’t afford enough bread to give everyone a piece.” And then Andrew, another one of Jesus’ friends, who’s standing pretty close to Charlie, says to Jesus, “There’s a little boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. That’s it. And as far as I can tell, he’s the only one here who brought any food with him at all.” And he rolls his eyes, as if to say, “Not very smart, are they?”

How did Andrew know how much food this little boy had in his backpack? Maybe he had spied on Charlie to see what he was carrying. But I think it’s more likely that Charlie had been trying to get Andrew’s attention. When my daughter Stacey was little, we used to practice having her pay for something in a store, or asking a clerk for help. And sometimes it took a very long time for her even to get *noticed* by the person she was trying to ask for help. She’d have to say “excuse me” about twenty times before adults would believe that she had any serious business to take care of. Maybe this same thing happened to Charlie. He heard the disciples talking with Jesus about food. He didn’t know how much they needed, but he knew he had *some*. So he said “excuse me” to anyone who could hear him, and then he tugged on Andrew’s sleeve when no one answered, and then he tugged on his sleeve again. And finally Andrew turned around and said “What?” in that “Can’t you see I’m busy” tone of voice, and Charlie held out his backpack full of food and said, “Here. You can have this.”

And then you know what happened. First Jesus said “thank you.” Then he took the bread, and he broke it in pieces, and he gave it out to them. To everyone. Somehow, it just kept coming and coming. No one saw exactly how, but somehow, pretty soon, everybody had a piece of bread in their hands, and they were laughing and happy again—even the parents—because their stomachs were full, and they felt good. And there were leftovers.

Just by offering his lunch to the person standing next to him, by offering just what he already had in his backpack, Charlie gave Jesus what he needed to make that miracle happen.

It wasn’t much. It didn’t take much.

In our summer travels on other paths—paths that run parallel to the way of Jesus—today we come to Muhammad Yunus, the Bangladeshi founder of Grameen Bank, and winner of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to create economic and social development “from below,” in the words of the Peace Prize Committee.

It started in 1974, when there was a great famine in Bangladesh. (It seems like there are always great famines in Bangladesh.) Muhammad Yunus was a professor of economics; and one day he led his university students on a field trip to a poor village. They interviewed a woman who made bamboo stools. She told them that she had to borrow about 30 cents to buy raw bamboo for each stool she made. She could only borrow the money at ridiculously high rates—but she had no choice. After repaying these loans, she was left with about a penny of profit on each stool. She was working hard—as hard as any middle class worker, but because the loans cost her so much, she could never get the kind of economic cushion that could raise her family above subsisting, barely scraping along.

This is crazy, Yunus thought. And so he lent her, from his own pocket, \$27. And then he watched. First she paid him back, and then she used her profits to expand her business. And with the same work she'd been doing before, she began to pull herself and her family out of poverty.

Yunus kept on giving out 'micro-loans'—small amounts of money. The people who borrowed—mostly women—used the money to build their own work—selling bananas, or cookies, running errands for people, even begging—into businesses that made a profit. And in 1983 he formed Grameen Bank, which means 'village bank.' What Grameen offered poor people—that no bank had offered them before—was trust, confidence that they would repay the loans just as they promised, and that they could make something good of their lives.

Here's how Muhammad Yunus describes his work:

<https://youtu.be/MgYes4bA7oM>

Today, Grameen Bank has disbursed more than \$8 billion to nearly seven million borrowers. 97 % of the bank's loans have been repaid. When a small loan—maybe \$20—is repaid, a larger loan is available. More than fifty per cent of the borrowers have risen above the poverty level in their country.

Here's the part that reminds me most of the Jesus story that we started with: Some years ago, a venture capitalist gathered together a group of the most successful entrepreneurs in the United States to meet with Muhammad Yunus, to imagine together what they could do to respond to the world's poverty. All Yunus had to offer was his own story. It was crazy to think that he could play in this league, this bank that doesn't follow any of the regular banking rules. What could he teach American business experts? All his borrowers and shareholders are poor women! He's from Bangladesh, for goodness' sake!

But here's what happened to the people who went to that meeting:

Pierre Omidyar, the founder of eBay, said later he had "a little epiphany" at that meeting. The next year, when he and his wife gave one hundred million dollars to the college they'd graduated from, they set it up so the income from that endowment could be used for the college. But the principal, they said, had to be invested in micro-finance—the kind of small loans Grameen Bank makes, based on trust that the world's poorest people will invest in the future if they are just given the tools to begin.

Susan and Michael Dell—founder of the computer company—began making grants from their family foundation to micro-finance institutions in India.

Google established a philanthropic arm that now invests in micro-finance.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation devotes a substantial amount of funding to financial services for the poor in developing countries.

There are a lot of stories in the Bible that are trying to tell us that there will always be enough. Enough food, enough money; enough love, kindness, generosity, and compassion. Maybe even enough time. For everyone. For leftovers.

Charlie offered five barley loaves and two fish. Muhammad Yunus offered \$27 and his trust in people.

It wasn't much. It didn't take much.

What are you carrying that someone needs you to share? What have you been hanging onto, holding back because it doesn't seem like it's enough to matter, or to make a difference; or because you've been worried that if you use it up now, it won't be there later, when you need it?

God is just waiting to do miracles with us. Miracles of love, and feeding. Miracles of change we haven't even imagined yet. Miracles of multiplication.