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“Give them some food yourselves” (Mark 6:37).

1 John 4:7-10; Mark 6:34-44

The nightly news has been a window into a relentless stream of bad news. We can turn away, but the reality will still be there, and no one is excused from caring. Most newscasts try to end on a positive note with stories of people who are making a difference. Most are about someone, even a child, who saw a need and started to respond in small ways, only to be joined by others with a pent-up desire to help. Amazing things have happened as resources and volunteers have multiplied to provide help during the pandemic.

Today’s Gospel reading is the model for such responses. A huge, hungry crowd has followed Jesus into the wilderness. He takes pity on them and tells his disciples to feed them. They are overwhelmed, but he directs them to distribute what they have, five loaves and two fish. A miraculous multiplication occurs, everyone is fed and there are even 12 baskets of leftovers. We know the story, are inspired by it, but still wonder if such miracles still happen or have ever happened in quite this way.

Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, named one of her books “Loaves and Fishes” to describe how the movement grew in response to need. She tells how people asked for bread, and they somehow found bread, or how homeless people moved in, and they made space. There is the same miraculous feel to this account, though many volunteers in soup kitchens and hospitality houses inspired by Day can attest to the amazing moments when hunger at the front door was met

by food coming in the back door, or a homeless family showed up just as the “Christ room” was ready.

The decisive moment in all these stories seems to be that once someone moved with pity crosses that first threshold and decides to help, even in the smallest way, something larger begins to happen. Feelings of helplessness and anxiety give way to confidence and creativity. Scarcity turns to abundance, chaos becomes community, the job gets done and a spirit of joy and gratitude fills everyone.

This seems to have been the point Jesus wanted his disciples to experience, that where there is love, anything can happen. Do the possible, take the first step, open the door of your heart, then watch what happens. The disciples began by counting heads and calculating the cost to prove it was impossible. But Jesus simply asked them what they had at hand, then set in motion the response that quickly multiplied into a feast and revealed that everything they needed was there, waiting only for their leadership and service to inspire it.

We don't really know for sure what happened in the wilderness. It offers a risky strategy. Will there be miracles? We won't know unless we cross the threshold and see what love can do when the need is there.

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