

“Filled and Focused” Luke 9:1-17

First Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City

Guest Preacher: Pastor Bethany Cseh

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I met Jamie when I was 22 years old in married-student housing of our university in Costa Mesa, California. She was the first woman I ever heard preach a sermon and I wasn't sure what to do about that because it was really good. I was raised conservative Baptist where women didn't hold leadership roles in the church, like they weren't allowed to read scripture out loud or pray from the front so I knew whatever Jamie was doing was wrong. So here I am, sitting under Jamie's teaching and being very impacted by her sermon about cutting off sin from a person's life while she cut leaves off a plant as an example, and I wasn't sure what to do with that.

Until I preached my first sermon and then I didn't know what to do with that either because I didn't believe women should preach! Well, here I am because Jamie is an incredible pastor and friend. She's a person who tells the truth without fear and with an obscene amount of love. She is unafraid of conflict so nothing is faked, like what you see is what you get with this woman. You are blessed to have her as your pastor because she loves Jesus more than a building, more than a denomination, more than her own reputation. She will lead you to Jesus every day and I'm so grateful to share about Jesus with you today too.

My oldest son is getting ready to graduate high school and go to college and I know without any doubt that I have not prepared him for this at all. You're welcome to judge me. I judge myself. And, oh, I've tried to prepare him. I've tried teaching him how to make eggs, how to do his laundry, how to navigate the bus system. But he's a really hard student and relies on others around him to help him out. And maybe that is its own form of preparation, knowing how to communicate with those who know what they're doing when you don't know what you're doing.

The reality is, he's not going to learn until I send him out. And I have all the faith in the world that he can do what needs to be done once he leaves my home and enters the real world. Doesn't mean I'm not worried or concerned for his well being, but I know he can do it, I trust he can do it. Because somehow, we all did. We all left our families of origin and most of us thrived because we figured it out.

This is the picture we get of Jesus with his disciples. He's like, “You guys aren't getting it. But I believe you're ready to do it even if you don't get it yet.”

So this is where we pick up in Luke's gospel.

Luke 9:1-6

When Jason and I first got engaged to be married, I remember being asked if we were ready and I thought, what does that even mean? Who's ready to be married? We were asked the same about having kids and I thought, who is ever ready to have kids? If we waited until we were ready, we'd never have kids. Because no one is ready for those big moments in life. I think God simply equips us for the areas we'd never be ready for. We get to learn as we go, which isn't always easy and certainly not simple. The difference between us and the disciples is that they didn't get to take their books and notes and supplies with them for answers and guidance. They took nothing with them. And why nothing? Why would Jesus send them out completely vulnerable like that?

I wonder if Jesus wanted them to be fully reliant on their faith that God would provide. It's illogical to travel without the necessary supplies, and yet Jesus sent them out in the hopeful sufficiency of God's provision and a prayer of "Give us this day our daily bread." I wonder, also, if their lack of resources allowed other people to participate in God's kingdom way through their hospitality and kind welcome. The disciples were sent out to bring God's kingdom into other towns and villages but those who lived there were called to stay and bring God's kingdom into their homes and neighbors homes. Some of you today have been called out, to bring the Gospel into places you never have been to, and others of you are called to stay. But either way, we are stretched, right? Opening up our homes as spaces of kingdom hospitality is stretching in many ways.

I also think we get the idea that we can't serve God well enough without what we believe is necessary, like a good sound system, a large enough choir, or the right budget. But Jesus looks at us and our extreme lack and says, "yes, your lack is exactly what I want to work with. My power is made perfect in your weakness and lack."

I also see the text saying for those who didn't receive the disciples into their homes or care for them, Jesus told the disciples to shake it off so they didn't carry that rejection with them. The reality is that we will be rejected. We will be left and doors will be slammed and your radical love and acceptance of others might be misunderstood. Shake it off and continue forth empowered by God to do so.

Because that's the truth here. Jesus believed in them. He empowered them and gave them authority to do what he believed they could do. They may not have believed they could do it, but Jesus believed they could. And they did it!

Luke 9:7-9

I think Luke included this here because when we share good news, there's risk involved. For the disciples, there was a huge risk. Just a couple chapters later we read that Herod looked for ways to kill Jesus because he believed Jesus was a threat to his own power.

Luke 9:10-17

I connect so deeply with the disciples here in this story. I mean, Jesus empowered them and gave them authority and believed in them and sent them out and it was awesome. They did it! They did what Jesus believed they could do. But here they are with Jesus again and they went right back into the same habits and patterns.

My niece left for college a couple years ago. Like my son, she didn't seem like she would thrive outside her home, but she did. She is thriving and doing so well. She's an R.A. and going to class and has friends. She's so capable. But the minute she gets back home, she's so incapable it isn't funny, resorting back to old, familiar patterns. Yelling for her mom to get her water, binge watching TV, leaving dishes in the sink.

I wonder if that's what's happening here? Besides the death and resurrection of Christ, this is the only story told in all four gospels, so we must pay attention because I think it has so much to teach us. I love that the disciples are like, Jesus, it's getting late and people are getting hangry and there's nothing we can do about this, so you gotta send them on their way. They are not our problem. And Jesus is like, yeah, it's your problem. Feed them. And they're like, "what? that's impossible. We have nothing. And Jesus is like, yeah, remember how five minutes ago I sent you out with nothing and you did it! You thrived! We can do so much with nothing!

How quick we are at resorting back to our old, familiar patterns, forgetting how much Jesus believes in us and empowers us to live out his ways in the world. But we don't believe we're capable or able to do it so we blame Jesus and wonder why God isn't intervening in the ways we expect. Jesus is like, "I gave you everything you needed to do my will. So you feed them!" I love how Jesus deflects the responsibility back onto his disciples, so they can't blame God.

It's hard to read stories about a multitude being fed enough food while people in the Middle East and Eastern Europe and all over the world are starving to death right now. It's hard to know God can bring mana to the wilderness and feed thousands of people by miraculously multiplying bread and fish while people line up at food banks because there's nothing left in their cupboards. What do we do with stories like this? We can shake our fists at God in our anger and despair and I don't think this is unfaithful. It tells us we're invested and we care. But while we ask, "Why, God? If you are able to multiply little, why are people starving?" I wonder if God is asking me, "Why, Bethany?" You feed them.

How much food did I throw away this week? That half rotisserie chicken in the back of my fridge? The lettuce that always gets slimy? The rotten apples? The old salad dressing no one liked? "You feed them," Jesus says. "With what?" I say, deflecting responsibility back on Jesus like it was his problem all along.

They tell Jesus what they have, five loaves of barley bread; barley bread is the food of the poor and lower class. Two fish, two sardines, which tradition tells us was probably pulpified into a jelly that would be spread onto the bread to help the bread go down a bit easier.

Jesus does an interesting thing before he blesses the food. Jesus asks the disciples to have the crowd of 15,000 into groups of 50. Whatever happened next, Jesus wanted this crowd to experience it in community. Every person went from one in a huge crowd to one in an intimate circle. You can't be known in a multitude. You can't be know if you're just one in a crowd. Last week, you heard different people share their stories here in church. You got to hear about their life, what they love, what's been hard, and how God has been with them through it all. These are ways you make your church small. Sharing food, eating a meal with a few families while laughing and passing the bread and some kid says they'd rather have chicken nuggets, this is church. This is community. This is becoming known. This is the picture of God's abundance.

Jesus breaks the loaves, gives thanks, and delivers them.

In this miraculous replication, we're not totally sure about the distribution process. Perhaps Jesus passed along the loaves and fish to a person who took enough and passed it to the next person who took enough and so on and so forth. Or maybe he had one of those air guns like at baseball games. You know, the ones that shoot t-shirts into the crowd, except this one was full of sardines and hard bread. Distribution of the food is not the point though. The miracle that everyone had enough is the point. Not one person went hungry.

Maybe some people there had food they brought for their family and contributed it as well, since they were getting to know their neighbors in those small groups, and as the fishes and loaves continued to be miraculously multiplied, you might just contribute to the miracle by sharing what you have with this new community. The miracle wasn't just bread and fish being changed. The miracle was a people being changed. The miracle isn't that it happened once. The miracle is that people began to see that God's kingdom economy doesn't look like Herod's palace but God's kingdom economy looks like a rural hillside where fishes and loaves and sharing provided so much that there were twelve baskets left over.

Twelve baskets for twelve disciples. They began the journey with nothing and Jesus was like, yep, that's what I can work with. I love working with nothing because I am the one of abundance. Don't wait until you have everything you think you need to share the good news of my love. You are enough in of yourself. Now, trust me like I trust you.