

“Love...the Budget Will Follow”

Mark 6: 30-44
Dwellings (excerpt)
By Linda Hogan

Rev. Brian Heron
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
January 24, 2010

What is it about our circumstances that sometimes a person like Nobel laureate, Betty Williams, can knock on doors and get blank stares and other times a wildfire of concern sweeps through the community? Within four hours in the middle of the night sixteen thousand people signed petitions for peace. It doesn't seem possible, does it?

On July 14 this past summer comedian, Dave Chappelle, showed up to Portland for an impromptu gathering. He stopped at a rental shop on Hawthorne to rent a small amplifier and told the clerk that he was doing a small show for a few friends at midnight. There was no advertising, no public announcements, and no advanced tickets. It turns out the clerk recognized him and he told a few of his friends to show up. At midnight thousands of people flooded downtown around Pioneer Courthouse Square. All of it simply by word of mouth in a matter of a few hours. It doesn't seem possible.

Just think if former President Clinton had come before us two weeks ago and asked that we set aside at least one dollar for every person in America for future disaster relief. What would our response have been? “*Our budgets are already stretched too far,*” we would have said. We might have complained about the need to keep our resources closer to home. Yet, in the days after the devastating Haiti earthquake suddenly hundreds of millions of dollars have poured into dozens of relief agencies. In the first 24 hours of the “Hope for Haiti” telethon 58 million dollars was raised and money will continue to pour in over the next six months. What didn't seem possible two weeks ago now almost seems easy.

What is this based on? It certainly isn't based on good economics or on our planned budgets. America is currently funding two wars, spending hundreds of billions of dollars in stimulus money, suffering through a devastating recession, and watching as unemployment and foreclosures continue to drag families and communities down. Yet, here we are digging deep in our pockets, forking over our spending money, and finding a few extra dollars where two weeks ago we swore we had nothing left to spare.

Jesus and his disciples are with a crowd of five thousand men (which means the crowd was probably closer to 20,000 when you include the women and children). As the day wears on it becomes apparent that the crowd is beginning to get hungry. The hour is late and Jesus went long on his sermon. The disciples begin to encourage Jesus to send the crowds away so that they may find food on their own. They were thinking sensibly. They were using their common sense. They were trying to plan ahead and avoid the crowd becoming unruly and possibly violent.

I don't know if Jesus would have done the same thing with every crowd that he attracted. I don't know what it was about this particular time that called him to make possible the impossible. I don't know why he didn't turn this same scene into a teachable moment about preparing for the Kingdom of God. He could have just as easily chastised the people for not being more prepared and ended with, “*Will you be this ill-prepared when the judgment day comes?*” But, he didn't do that.

Instead, he was moved to compassion. Instead, he told his disciples to do the most irrational of things and take charge of feeding the crowd. The funny thing is he didn't say, “*Well, let's see first what we have to work with.*” He didn't say, “*Well, I sure would like to help,*

if I could, but I just don't have the resources today." No. He spoke first out of compassion saying, **"You give them something to eat."** Then, when the disciples began to query about how to go about that, he started checking out his resources. He decided to act first and then survey his available resources. He said, *"We're going to do this. Now we have to figure out how."*

Isn't that interesting? Has America or has any one of us hesitated in our efforts to reach out to the people of Haiti? I doubt anyone of us here actually sat down with our budgets to decide IF we could help. We might have sat down with our budgets after deciding to help. But, our decision to act compassionately came first and our budgeting came second. Did Betty Williams sit down and pull a plan together for how she was going to bring peace to Ireland? Did she think, *"I need this many people to organize for me and this many people to canvas."* No, in a deep and profound moment of compassion she simply cried out, *"What kind of a people have we become..."* And something happened. How many people before her had cried out the same thing? How many campaigns had there already been to stop the violence of Ireland? I don't know. But, what I do know is that Betty Williams somehow struck a chord. Everything was right and the people were ripe for a change. And four hours later in the middle of the night suddenly 16,000 people had signed petitions for peace.

If you want to ask me the mechanics of how it is Jesus fed the 5000 with just five loaves of bread and two fish, I will tell you I don't really know how he did that. If you want to know whether it was some supernatural power where he could multiply loaves with the wave of his magic wand, I will tell I just don't know. If you want to know whether the story is just a metaphorical way of saying that Jesus always satisfies those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, I will tell you I don't know.

But, what I do know is this. There are times in our own lives when our own spirit and God's spirit are so in line that anything can happen. There are times when the heartbeat of our own lives is beating with the rhythm of God. And when that happens amazing things happen. Impossible things happen. Things that we never believed could be done. Things that often don't make common sense.

Have you ever seen a basketball player get in the zone? It's an amazing thing. A player who generally averages ten points a game can suddenly hit a rhythm that is nothing less than magical. It doesn't matter where he is on the court or who is in his face suddenly the ball is swishing through the net every time he throws it up. Before the other team knows what has hit them that player has thirty points before he settles back down to earth. It doesn't happen often, but when it does it's magical. It's as if he suddenly finds a supernatural, out-of-this world rhythm that is unexplainable.

We are currently in this time of discernment at Eastminster. I share this sermon with you because discernment isn't so much about planning and programming for the future. It really has very little to do with preparing a budget that will put us over the top. Discernment is a time of listening for God's rhythm. The most important thing we can do is to honor the movement of the Spirit among us. It doesn't really matter whether it's a fighting spirit or a tired spirit. It doesn't really matter whether it's a spirit that leads to building or a spirit that leads to letting go. What matters is that we get in touch with the rhythm of God. What matters is that we listen to what season this is in God's unfolding time. **"For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven,"** reads Ecclesiastes.

Remember Nobel laureate, Betty Williams, had just witnessed the deaths of children in Ireland. She had held one of those children as she died. There is something powerful that sometimes happens when we act purely out of compassion rather than on common sense.

Sometimes, if everything is just right it is the purest act that brings the greatest results. Betty Williams simply cried out to her people, “*What kind of people have we become?*” and thousands in her community took a stand for peace within hours. An earthquake devastates Haiti and without a second thought we toss out all our best intentions for this month’s budget and respond simply because we are compassionate people.

I will tell you again I don’t know exactly how it was that from five loaves and two fish Jesus fed a multitude of 5000 families with food left over. But, I will also tell you that I don’t know how it is that Betty Williams’ mournful cry suddenly moved a nation to stand for peace. I will also tell you I don’t know why we couldn’t dip into our budgets more deeply two weeks ago, but this week our whole nation has forgotten about the recession while we respond to Haiti. All I can tell you is that when we focus more on compassion than we do our budgets something special happens. The more we live and act out of compassion the more we find ourselves living in the same rhythm that God lives in. And when that happens, nations can heal long-standing hatreds. A world suddenly puts aside their differences to stand with an earthquake-shattered nation. And a hungry crowd will be fed and nourished and filled. There are resources out there, there are resources within us that have never been tapped. We are capable of so much more than we can imagine. Sometimes it’s best to simply commit to acting compassionately and let the resources flow from unexpected places.

Do you all remember that special night at the Rose Garden on April 25, 2003? The Blazers were about to play the Dallas Mavericks. None of us probably remember the game itself or even who won that night. But, what we all remember was when 13 year old Natalie Gilbert faltered while singing the National Anthem. At “the twilight’s last gleaming” she suddenly drew a blank and couldn’t remember the words. There she was a slight vulnerable 13 year old standing in front of 20,000 fans on national television. And in one of the purest moments of compassion, then Blazers’ coach, Maurice Cheeks, sauntered over to Natalie, put his arm around her, and began to sing the national anthem with her. Within seconds 20,000 Portland friends were lifting her up and singing it with her.

My friends, there are resources out there. There are resources within us. Sometimes we need to love first and believe that the budget will follow. On April 25, 2003 Natalie Gilbert believed that she it was completely up to her to sing the national anthem. What she discovered is that she had 20,000 friends to help her.