

NOW WHAT?
Luke 9: 1-6, 10-17
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Last week, the Word of God came alive to us through four powerful testimonies found in the sixth chapter of Luke's Gospel. We heard from Peter, the fisherman, who was minding his own business when Jesus came to him, but who was moved so profoundly that he could not help but follow, leaving everything behind. We heard from the Leper who had nothing to leave behind, but everything to gain and came to Jesus as his only hope. We heard from the Paralytic who was unable to get to Jesus on his own and yet, was brought into the presence of new life through the literal support of friends, a community of care. And finally we heard from Levi, the tax collector who seemed to have everything he could possibly want, but nothing that he really needed.

We were reminded that each of us has an individual story to tell of our encounter with Jesus Christ and the life-changing transformation that follows. Although each of our stories is unique, all of our stories are grounded in the assurance of new life that Jesus Christ freely offers us. It is such a central, important part of our faith that every week when we gather here for worship we confess our sins before God and one another and we are reminded and renewed by that profound forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

Last week, we also learned that by examining four stories alongside one another, we have a fuller view and are not tempted to make broad assumptions from limited information. For example, we were encouraged to consider that while Peter is asked to leave everything behind, that is not necessarily the story of each of us. Levi, the tax collector, was encouraged to continue his work in his own place, in his own house even, but to do it in a new way.

This week we lift up two more stories from Luke's Gospel as we begin to explore the "Now what?" question of faith. Encounter with Jesus – check. Transformed by one who gives us new and abundant life – check. So what happens next?

One thing is clear from the stories of those who receive new life in Christ and that is that they are sent out with the message of good news to share with others. Peter, leper, paralytic, tax collector all reimmerse into their communities to share the message.

New life is never a gift meant to be tenaciously clung to as a personal possession. It is always meant to be shared - our words of grace and love and our acts of compassion and justice. We ended our service last week singing, "Will you come and follow me," but now consider the ways in which that call is lived out.

Although we don't follow the futures of many of the people whom Jesus encounters...the leper, the paralytic...we do follow the lives of the apostles and so we'll begin there this week. Taking a cue from last week's reminder not to make broad assumptions based upon a single incident, we lift up two of the "now what?" stories from the disciples. This is particular helpful because it appears to me from an initial overview that Jesus is giving two very different messages to the apostles.

Jesus would have been a terrible Boy Scout leader. What part of "be prepared" did he not understand? Can you imagine if we sent out our youth mission work trip participants ... or others ... and sent them home with a note saying, "Don't bring anything! Don't bring extra changes of work clothes, don't bring tools, don't bring any snacks." It seems ridiculous and not just for a work trip, but for all of life. Don't we pride ourselves on being prepared, having what we need...being self-sufficient? In contrast to all of that, Jesus is sending out these messengers of good news with the expectation that they be totally dependent upon others for their room and board. Is this what Jesus expects of us, too?

Having just returned from what we read to be a successful mission, we now find the disciples and Jesus surrounded by a crowd of thousands of spiritually hungry people clamoring for this good news from Jesus. As the hour grows late and people begin to get restless, the disciples realize that these people are physically hungry, too and suggest to Jesus that he send them away to find room and board in the local villages...just as they had been asked to do as a part of their mission. Jesus seems to turn the tables on them when he replies, "You give them something to eat." In fairness, I can hear the disciples muttering, "You told us to leave everything behind and go out totally dependent. So what are we supposed to feed these people with? We don't have that kind of money or resources. Among the lot of us we only have a couple of loaves of bread and some fish."

I began to pore through these stories this week, and I was reminded of the year I spent living in West Africa, living in Ghana. When I went to Ghana I went as someone with a background as a musician and educator, so many of my friends and family expected a big part of my experience to be to learn Ghanaian music and drumming and dance, which of course I was looking forward to. One of the songs I learned while I was there was a particular favorite of mine from the village where I lived, the village of Kumbuyili. On Sunday mornings when they would gather for worship they would sing together.

The words in English say: *I was in the darkness, I was in the darkness and he brought the light to me, the lamp to me and now I am in the brightness, the light, the daylight.* The last word of the song in the local language of Dagbani, can be translated into *daylight*, but it can also be translated as *enlightenment*, to be enlightened. To ask a Ghanaian to describe it to you they would say it means to have one's eyes opened to see things that one would not be able to see before. I was about to discover my year in Ghana was all about being able to see things that I had not seen before.

I went to Ghana feeling particularly well prepared. I carted an entire footlocker along with me: short wave radio, water purifiers, extra medicine, everything that I thought I would need for a successful mission in Ghana, only to discover that most of those things were unnecessary. In fact, when I met with the church leaders and mentors who would guide me through my year of service in Ghana I discovered that this year was going to be unlike the typical year of international service through our church.

They said to me, "we want you to spend your first six months doing nothing." Seriously? "We want you to do nothing. Leave everything behind, take a change of clothes, go into the village but don't do anything. Don't fix anything, don't start anything, and don't create anything. Just be in the village. Live with the people, learn their language, learn their culture, learn to eat the food that they eat, learn to celebrate their celebrations and rituals and holidays. Just be a part of the community, don't take your agenda with you, leave everything else behind."

It was the most difficult six months of my life, not doing anything; part of how I had been wired from the very beginning of my life in this culture, and yet I did learn

language and culture, I formed relationships, I began to know people in a way I had not known them before in service.

Half-way through my year they met with me again and said, “Now that you have formed relationships, now that you are a part of this community, now let’s think together about the ways in which you might be a part of ministry in this place as well. As it turned out, ironically, the drumming, singing and dancing in Ghana were all part of family lines that were passed down from father to son and mother to daughter. It turned out that none of those families lived in my village. There was very little singing and dancing and drumming in my village.

One thing jumped out to me that was particularly alarming: I had an “age-mate” as they would call them. I had a peer in the little village named Abukari; he was the same age as me. He got sick one day and was taken to the hospital and two days later they informed me that he had passed away. I was shocked - how was it possible that someone so healthy could be gone so quickly? My grief of losing Abukari was quickly overshadowed by an even more dramatic event: the leaders in the village accused one of the elderly women of being a witch and of poisoning him and they beat her and ran her out of the village. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing; it seemed so primitive, so archaic, so unlike the hospitality and generosity and the warmth from which I had been received. It didn’t make any sense to me. As that experience happened about the time that I was meeting with church leaders again, I said: surely there has to be another way that the gospel message can communicate a story of love and forgiveness; a way of understanding brokenness, grief and sin that might have a different response than to blame someone and to run them from the village.

So I was to spend the next six months of my year in Ghana studying witch craft and witchcraft accusation. Studying the understanding in social circles about why people do the things they do, working with church leaders and Christians in the village to understand in a new way a gospel message that might speak to them about how to deal with brokenness and sin. It was surprising to me that in this experience I was called upon to bring everything that I had to offer, every ounce of intelligence, every ounce of strength, every ounce of courage and passion and commitment to that community into which I had become so deeply ingrained. I had to bring all of it to bear as we worked together to find other ways of understanding witch craft and witchcraft accusation.

It was a rather surprising turn of events that, of course, I could have never had imagined or predicted when I began my year. It seems to me that there might be something in that experience that speaks to the stories that we read today. Jesus begins by sending the disciples out with nothing; he tells them to leave everything behind, to not to do anything. Yes, they are called to preach good news and to heal those that need to be cured, but he also says to leave things behind for this reason: because he wants to begin by breaking down the barriers that separate us. It can be very tempting as we go about this business of sharing good news to want to go out being in control, to want to go out thinking we are self-sufficient, that we are going to know exactly how things are going to turn out, that we bring all the resources we need. Instead, Jesus says no, I want you to go out as vulnerable; I want you to go out as humble. I want you to get away from the kind of detached patron-client relationships that are so tempting to form when one is involved in service and sharing good news. Instead, be reminded that you are totally dependant upon me for everything that you have and will have. Instead, be reminded that in all of our relationships we meet first and foremost as human beings, face to face, person to person; not as people of different classes or races or opportunities, but as people, as one family, all God's children.

So, go out with nothing, pretending for a moment that you don't have any of those things with you. Acknowledging, more importantly, that what we take with us is the faith within and not the resources we bring from without. Our call to ministry and service is always one that invites us to step beyond what we think is possible. Step beyond what we think we can be in control of. God never calls us to a mission based on principles of success and safety as we might understand them, instead he calls us to step out beyond.

That can be a frightening thing to do, to step out with humility, with vulnerability, and so Christ also feeds us in the midst of those times. Those who would have read Luke's gospel in the early church would have, of course, heard in The Feeding of the Five Thousand, memories of the feeding of the people in exodus; those who were in the wilderness, who were fed with Manna they would have been reminded that throughout all of our history God has taken care of us. It is safe to be dependent upon God. They would have heard too, in Christ's breaking of the bread and sharing it, they would have heard memories of the Eucharistic meal, of that last supper that Jesus shared with his

disciples and they would have been reminded again, that Christ gives us everything that we need.

And so totally dependant upon God, we are then freed; freed from a false sense of security and control to completely commit ourselves to all that God offers us and all that God asks of us. After all, I believe that our lives are never an accident, that everything that we bring to the table, all of our triumphs and brokenness, all of our relationships and our family, all of our experiences, our gifts, our talents... God does in fact ask us to bring all those things with that spirit of humility and dependence and to offer all of them in God's service.

It was interesting for me to note this week as I read again the story of the feeding of the five thousand, a new insight. The disciples have two loaves and five fish, but wouldn't it have been possible for Jesus to just have taken one of the loaves and one of the fish and still break them into enough pieces to feed everyone. Surely Jesus could have accomplished that; it would have been essentially the same miracle. That is not what Jesus does; Jesus asks the disciples to give him everything they have, don't hold anything back. Sure I can perform miracles but I will perform them with everything that you put on the table, with everything that you have to offer. It is when we offer our entire selves to God that we can do so knowing that God is going to use us and use everything that we bring in ways that we can not possibly imagine.

The disciples' lives turned out differently than they had imagined. My life in Ghana turned out differently than I had imagined. If I had only gone and stuck with the original plan, only stuck with what I had thought was possible, I never would have experienced all that God had in mind. I think that is always true for all of us, that when we bring our entire selves committed to God, everything that we have to offer, we will be surprised by the ways in which God will use us. If we only engage in ministries and mission that seem safe and possible and predictable, we will never get caught up in God's vision of ministry and mission among us. We will never get caught up in the totality of God's vision of justice in the world today.

When we were in the darkness God brought the light to us and now we are in the brightness, in the daylight. Now we are enlightened, we see with new eyes. Eyes of humility and vulnerability totally dependant upon God for everything that we are; totally

immersed and connected to one another in community; totally committed to offer all of ourselves to God in service, because friends, God has called each of us. God has called all of us to be a part of the ministry and mission of this church. Now, won't it be exciting to find out why?

Amen.