A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*“The Blessing in Ephesians 3”*

Ephesians 3:14-21

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When our children were little we read bedtime stories, often letting the child pick which book to read. Often they would pull off the shelf a wonderfully illustrated Bible storybook for children, just like the ones many of you have received when dedicating your children here at DaySpring. I would open the book to the table of contents, which listed about 5 different Bible stories and their page numbers. Each story title was in a different color. *Simon and His Boat* was in blue. *The Man Who Helped* was in red. The story of the feeding of the 5000 was in yellow. Before they could learn to read, they learned to identify what story went with which color so they could point to the story they wanted for that night.

Often, in my memory, most of the time they would scan the page, point to the yellow letters and say, “Tell the story about the little boy.” They loved the story of the little boy, and wanted to hear it over and over. So, in honor of that memory, here’s the story of the feeding of the 5000, or as it’s titled in the yellow letters: *The Boy Who Shared His Lunch*.

(Read Story)

They were entranced by that story. Who isn’t?

Here’s a little boy with a little lunch. But what is that when the need is so great?

I think we can all identify with the feeling that what I have available to me is not close to being enough for the trouble that I’m facing. It’s when what I have is not enough for what I need. I don’t know if children feel the weight of that part of the story, but maybe they do. Maybe children intuitively understand they live in a world that’s bigger than they are and without some help or even with lots of help, they can’t fix the problems that are around them. They need someone to trust. And here’s a little boy who came to Jesus with everything he had. Jesus took what the boy had when no one else had anything to share, or they weren’t willing to share. Jesus took what this little boy had to share and was willing to share, something as simple as his lunch his mom probably packed for him, and thousands of people got to eat.

I feel sure what children see is that a bunch of adults had a problem they couldn’t solve and they were worried. And then Jesus, with the help of a child among all those adults, solved the problem. The child isn’t exactly the hero. Jesus is the hero, but Jesus is the hero because a child did what he had learned children ought to do: be willing to share, give what you have, help other people, and trust Jesus.

Adults see the same things in the story, and love it for the same reasons, but adults see something else too, or they feel it. They feel the burden the disciples carried between what was expected of them and what they were able actually to do. A child wasn’t asked to feed all those people, but some adults were.

“Feed these people. We can’t.”

“Why not?”

“We’d like to, don’t get us wrong. Of course we’d like to feed all these people. We’d like to do a lot of things that aren’t in our power. Don’t you see, we have nothing to eat. We don’t have enough money to buy enough to eat, and look how many people there are, and look where we are, way out here in a desolate place where you, let’s all remember, brought us. You want something to happen that cannot happen and will not happen.”

To amplify their impossible situation, they bring forward a little boy, the contents of whose lunchbox is frankly more than enough for a single person, would be an ample meal for two people, adequate nourishment for three, a modest repast for maybe four, a snack for five, an appetizer for six, a bite for seven, a taste for eight, a morsel for nine, a crumb for ten. Totally irrelevant for 5000 people. That’s all we have. That’s the point the disciples were making.

That’s all you’ve got? Jesus feigns a frown at them, and sighs. Years later the little boy, as an old man, will insist that just at that moment, Jesus winked at him.

That’s all you’ve got, huh. It’s not enough, huh. You can’t do it. We’re outmatched, outwitted, outsmarted, overwhelmed, under resourced. We’re burned out, burned up, trampled over, completely spent. We’ve got empty pockets, empty hopes, drained hearts, worn hands, tired feet. We can’t do anything about it, huh. Watch this.

I think it was moments like that, when Jesus outdid any reasonable expectations or assessment of limitations, that stayed with the disciples. Jesus had a way of taking a hopeless situation and turning it into something they, and the world, would never forget. That his own resurrection was the chief example of this, they realized later, shouldn’t have surprised them. We should have known, they said to one another, we should have seen that coming.

It’s those kind of stories about Jesus that inspired the expansive, glorious language in the blessing we read in the 3rd chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians. The blessing draws on the limitless power of God, draws the limitless power of God right to the human heart.

“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

What a blessing from him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think. It raises the question: What is it that you ask or think? What is your desperate need? What is your dream? What is your hope? What do you believe to be the impossible? God can do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, by the power at work within us.

God’s abundant power, the riches of his glory, is at work within us. It is at work within you.

There is a name for that abundant power. There’s a name for the riches of God’s glory. But that name is not miracle. God’s power and glory are not made manifest primarily through miracle, those supernatural disruptions of intrusion into the way things have been going. I love miracle stories. They’re the best, and you may feel right now that what you need, or what someone you love needs, is nothing short of a miracle.

Maybe so. I pray for some of you regularly, daily even. I pray for miracles. But I’m reminded this morning that the highest name for God’s power and glory is not miracle. It is love. That name is agape. Love.

Nowhere in John’s gospel is the word miracle used. The feeding of the 5000, just like water into wine, just like sight for the blind man in John’s gospel, are signs. The disruption is a sign of something even greater than feeding hungry people, giving sight to blind people. It’s a sign of God’s love. In Ephesians, where we read that powerful blessing, agape love is invoked twenty times. Ten times as a noun and ten times as a verb. Love is and love does.

In the Ephesians doxology, the prayer for us is that we may be rooted and grounded in agape love. Is that love in which we are rooted and grounded a noun or as a verb? Are we established in love as a thing, or are we established in love as a way of being, no matter the cost, circumstances, or futility?

From the world of agriculture, rooted means being planted in a place into which our roots go deep and from which we draw life like a tree drinks water. From the world of construction, grounded is being set on a strong foundation by which we stand firm in the storms that blow our way. Being grounded like a strong tower is assurance that you’ll still be there when the winds stop blowing or the ground stops shaking. Being rooted like a tree means you draw on the source of life to produce life. Grounded is assurance. Rooted is fecund. Grounded is stability. Rooted is generative. Grounded is standing on solid rock. Rooted is finding the water of life. If it’s helpful to think of it this way, I think we’re grounded in love as a noun, and rooted in love as a verb.

At any rate, rooted like a tree, or set on a sure foundation like a strong tower, I can’t help but think that a third image of love is in the story of the little boy who shared his lunch. Love is abundant. To participate in the abundance of love is to be swept up into a way of life that is open handed and kind, patient and gentle, generous and hopeful.

We are not simply filled with God’s love to make us feel satisfied and content, but we are filled for the goal of God’s fullness in and through the world. It is in this way, and only in this way, that we come to know the love that surpasses knowledge. Mr. Fred Rogers, who seemed to be genuinely rooted, grounded, and abundant said, “Love seems to be something that keeps filling up within us. The more we give away, the more we have to give." He learned that from church and from Jesus, and maybe from the little boy who shared his lunch. The more we give away, the more we have to give.

That’s the miracle of the little boy’s lunch. It’s not that so many people were able to consume so much. It’s that one person’s act of giving what they have to Jesus in the face of impossible challenge became a feast for everyone with twelve baskets left over, more than enough for each discouraged, skeptical disciple to carry home as a reminder of the abundant love of God where there’s always enough even in desolate places. This story is the closest John comes to instituting the eucharist. In John’s gospel Jesus doesn’t say a whole lot at the Last Supper in chapter thirteen about this is my body and my blood. He doesn’t give a long speech, which is odd because Jesus gives long explanations about everything in John but the eucharist. It’s like the only thing he doesn’t talk about at length.

Unless this is it, unless this is the moment he teaches the importance of the sacred meal. Possibly with a wink, he looks around at any of us who are convinced today you don’t have enough, that you aren’t good enough or spiritual enough or have enough faith. He looks at the offerings you bring, meager in your own eyes; he looks at us with a penetrating gaze, and sees us with eyes of love. Love is like a seed planted in good soil, and it grows up and it grows down, rooted deep in good soil, producing fruit in abundance. Love is like a strong tower, grounded on solid rock. Established on solid rock, it does not move. Love is like a feast sparked by a child’s faith and willingness to come open-handed.

Let us pray: O God of life, of strength, and abundance, lead us now to your Table, that here we may feast on the bread of life and drink deeply from the cup of salvation. As we prepare our hearts for this Table, speak to our inner beings of your love for us, give us assurance, give us hope, give us strength.

For your children here this morning who have not yet trusted you, speak tenderly to them of your grace and of your invitation to life in Christ. Bless each of us today that we may know your power, your glory, your love living inside of us. Amen.

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