

MIGHTY DEEDS WITH MEAGER RESOURCES

BY JIMMY R. ALLEN

Scripture: John 6:1-14

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Introduction: A great American Philosopher, Mr. Walt Kelly, draws the comic strip, Pogo. In it he has the little possum saying to his fellow creatures of the swamp, "The only trouble with our country is that we are surrounded with insurmountable opportunity." The Apostles must have felt a similar sense of being overwhelmed by opportunity when Jesus posed the question, "How can we feed this multitude of famished men?" They had come out of their spiritual hunger to hear of the Bread of Life. Now they are suffering from physical hunger and Jesus cares about both dimensions of man's need. The response of the Apostles has its modern counterparts. Phillip incredulously looked about and said, "why with all we have we could just give a bite apiece. What good would that do?" Andrew timidly comes forward with the lad's lunch and says, "Here's a little food, but what is that among so many?"

The feeling of being overwhelmed by a tidal wave of need is a familiar one. Those who labor to stretch meager resources around a globe whose map has been rewritten dozens of times in recent years are keenly aware of the forces which engulf us. Dr. C. W. Black, an eloquent preacher in our city, said to a conference of black preachers at Bishop College some time ago, "The church always operates out of meager resources. If it waits until its inventory shows it has adequate food in its warehouses to feed the multitudes, it never feeds anyone."

What Jesus does on that ancient hillside is more than an event revealing his power and compassion, it is a pattern for action and a promise for fulfillment. Let us look together at the scripture to discover the shape of our opportunity, strategies for response, and the Spirit of God who does mighty deeds with meager resources.

I. The Shape of Our Opportunity

1. The Shape of Spiritual Hunger

The five thousand were in that wasteland because of spiritual hunger. Disillusioned with the dead religion of their day, despairing of the emptiness of following their political leaders by appeasing the powers of Rome, they were spiritually curious and seeking. That same spiritual hunger exists today. It is reflected in the very apathy about which we are com-

plaining. The apathy of urban man is one of disillusionment with the promises of yesterday's messiahs. There is, as Os Guinness has said, a "dust of death" on a decade of activism. The smug smile of secular man who thought he had "come of age" and did not need God has been replaced by a worried frown. Spiritual hunger has broken out in unlikely places. Technological man is attending seances, looking for an exit to the East in mystical and meditation religions, reading his horoscope. He is an Urban Orphan looking for a Father and a Family. He is a systems man whose systems are not working. Stagflation is sapping his economic strength. Skepticism has sapped his spiritual strength. Chemicals of drugs and sensations of sex have failed to satisfy. He is searching. Around the world this hunger is found.

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2. The Shape of Physical Hunger.

Famished men stirred the compassion of a caring Christ. Those tears must be flowing today in a world in which nutrition experts are seriously debating what they call "triage". That's a term for separating nations into three groups: those whose food needs will be met no matter what we do, those whose food needs cannot be met no matter what we do, and those who might be helped by a maximum effort. The suggestion is to write off a third of the world as unsavable and work only on those whose long range needs can be met. The cool calculation of that reasoning is as frightening as listening in on a statistics discussion by the operators of Dachau. The stark facts are that "of the 60 million deaths recorded each year, about 70% are due to hunger or to problems arising from hunger . . . The UN Food and Agricultural Organization estimates that an average of 15,000 people die of malnutrition daily, 10,000 of them children." (Post American, March, 1974, p. 4)

The task seems overwhelming, but the urgency of need demands a Christian conscience response. We must be at the task of demonstrating the validity of our love in very practical ways. "I was hungry and ye fed me" is the recurring theme of a gospel that is good news. Jesus is careful to point beyond a miraculous deed or a temporary meal to eternal power and the bread which lasts. (John 6:27) We must demonstrate love through helping men to eat. We have not met their deepest need until we lead them to the Eternal Bread.

3. The Shape of Sagging Morality

In a book called "Our Depleted Society" Melman Seymour described the inevitable ruin of a throw away culture depleting its resources. We are challenged by a society passing through a cycle of depleting our spiritual heritage. In this bicentennial year, we are celebrating our freedoms. Separation of church and state has created an atmosphere of volun-

tary response to God which has fostered the strongest religious life of any nation in the world. In the last few decades, however, we have followed a path of license rather than liberty, of unrestrained greed breeding injustice, of political leadership by deception. Families fragment in a society in which non-marriage has become a defensible life style. Trust erodes. Corruption at the top layers of leadership in business, labor, and politics creates a stench of death in the air. Into these graveyards of rotting corpses of consciences mutilated and eternal principles rejected, we are called to go with a resurrection message. In the name of Jesus Christ, we are to call from the grave ideals, long dead, now alive in men who have come to new life.

Few experiences top the thrill of a pastor sensing the Spirit of God challenging and changing men in this dimension of life. In the past few months, I have seen that challenge being met. A business executive calls to say, "Pray for me tomorrow, I'm going to tell them about the slush fund I inherited when I took this job. I may not have a job tomorrow night." A government official says, I've been studying the book of Amos, and I cannot remain silent about the practices happening in my structure of government." A corporate executive says, "Pray for me. Human lives are at stake in the mess I'm called upon to clean up. I want to discern the lines between justice and mercy in such a way as to salvage people." Sagging morality becomes one shape of our overwhelming opportunity.

II. *Some Strategies for Response*

Mark recounts the detail of Jesus set about feeding the five thousand. The task was too massive. Twelve men could not feed five thousand. He began by getting the task into pieces they could handle. Breaking the groups into fifties and hundreds, he set out the strategy for dealing with their hunger. Overwhelming tasks can only be tackled by breaking them up into sections and going to work on each piece of it. Winning America to Christ is an overwhelming task. Witnessing to a weary and warped world is an overwhelming task. These are as impossible as feeding five thousand men with a little hand full of disciples and a lad's lunch. We must somehow get hold of it.

Shortly after the Peace Corps was founded, a fifty-two year-old Black school teacher named Madge Shipp volunteered. When asked why she would leave the security of home for a tiny atoll in which she would be the only American, she said, "When I see the big complicated problems of our world I know I can't understand them, much less solve them. I want to take them and smash them down into little tiny pieces and get a fragment I can hold in my own two hands. I want to work on that."

Let's see how we can get the fragments into our own two hands. What can we do about the strategies to face the overwhelming opportunity of our nation and world? Strategy should include several steps.

1. *Assess our Resources*

The first instruction of Jesus was, "Find out how much food we have." It looked pitifully small, but the first step was an honest assessment of what he had to work with. Southern Baptists count twenty million persons, institutions, churches, talented young people, thousands of retired skilled persons, financial resources. Over against a world or a nation, it looks pitifully inadequate, but the first step is to see what we have to work with.

We started out in our church family to discover our community needs and work from that. We discovered soon that these needs were limitless. Hurting humanity was on every hand. No matter what we did, we would be swept away on

that tidal wave. Then we discovered that the place to start is with the gifts and skills of the people. That's where we must begin. What are the gifts of the fellowship? God has a place for every gift. They fit together in his sovereign plan. This is what Elizabeth O'Conner calls, "The Eighth Day of Creation." It is fitting the gift to the opportunity.

We are blessed in a day of tremendous financial problems with some of the best financial minds in the nation. In a day of surge of creativity in the arts, we number some of the finest talent in communication skills among our number. In a time of crisis of the drug culture, God has gifted us with psychologists and counselors. Persons of political skills sit in our church pews. Teachers and doctors sit beside plumbers and electricians. Let's find out what we have to work with and design our response to a needy world to that pattern. It can be done in the churches and in the larger fellowship. Our computer technology could build the largest skill bank in the world if our imagination and dedication could be fired up with that vision. The question to Moses "What is that you have in your hand" is more than an ancient inquiry on a wilderness hillside, it is the key question of our day. That tool of his daily work, given to God, became the instrument of deliverance in one of the miraculous movements of ancient history. What can God do in our contemporary world if we discover the tools of our lives and make them available unreservedly to His work!

2. *Attend to the Fundamentals*

All the talent in the world is to no avail unless we attend to the fundamentals of leading men to Christian experience, nurture, acceptance of the authority of God's Word. Those who think they are going to create new spiritual life styles while ignoring birth are as wrong as those who think that whole of the Christian life is spent in the O.B. ward. Birth is essential to life but it is not all of life. Bill Glass, ex all pro-football player, helped me understand something when he explained why the professional football teams seem to do so much in the last two minutes of the game. The two minute drill amazes me. He says that the coaches' instruction in the furious pace of disorder and bedlam at the closing moments of the game is simple. When everything is falling apart and the pressure is on, get back to the basics. Just remember your basic job and do it. Pay no attention to the frills and fancies. Back to the basics of blocking, tackling, running, passing. In a world gone wild, we need to be back to the basics of what it takes to meet God, to grow in God, to depend on God, to expect from God.

3. *Attempt the Innovative*

One of the great steps Baptists have taken in recent years has been to begin to risk failing without fearing that we would be failures. We are not as good in our cities and in our world mission witness with the understanding that we can't just do yesterday's methods faster and meet today's challenge. It is sometimes a painful process. It is always an exciting one. Some of our finest moments are coming under creative leadership which is willing to attempt something different. We are beginning to reject what Ralph Neighbour calls the "Church's Seven Last Words," "We've never done it that way before."

In international missions we are discovering the day of Lay Involvement in missions, acceleration of crusade evangelism utilizing laymen, natural disasters as days of opportunity for service and change in strategy, and hunger as an urgent responsibility. Our strength as Baptists has always been the openness of our people at the grass roots to sense the wind of the Spirit and respond. That breath of mission awareness and willingness to give of themselves is moving in fantastic proportions. If we miss opening the channels for it, we will eternally regret it.

A solemn word must be uttered. Tokenism may be our undoing. By tokenism I mean, we see a vast need or a new strategy. We assign a man, open an office, issue a press release, print a program, and assume we are doing something. It is significant that Jesus instructs his men to pick up the overflow and they gather twelve baskets of food. There is a total response by Jesus, not a token one.

In national missions we are discovering new urban strategies, openness of the mass media to direct confrontation with the gospel, designing the style of programs to the various publics we discover in our communities. The opportunities are immense. God has gifted us with fantastic resources if our imagination can conceive of the means for harnessing them for the Gospel. Accelerating what we are doing, we can develop lay Christians to impact each public in the Master's name.

We are already developing a Phillip People, (Acts 8:26) lay witnesses who sense the Spirit of God guiding them to Gaza roads to share Jesus with searching people.

We need to develop Titus People; those who are laboring in the tough places of racially changing neighborhoods and inner cities. They are the ones who should be brought to feel the support of the whole family. "For this cause" Titus, "I left you in Crete." (Titus 1:5)

We need a network of Samuel People standing beside the decision-makers of the political life of our land to say "God forbid that I sin against you by ceasing to pray for you" (I Samuel 12:23), to counsel "To obey is better than to sacrifice" (I Samuel 13:22), and to add the counsel of Christian conscience to the formulas of public decisions. Men need to know "Ebenoezer . . . hitherto the Lord has helped us." (I Samuel 7:12)

We need to take our creative artists and musicians seriously in the witness to our contemporary world. A Jeremiah People of Baptist Christians could dramatically portray the message of God in every media. A whole network of dinner theaters and other types of dramatic groups could witness to groups of persons never touched in stained glass atmosphere. This age of spiritual awakening is providing the stimulus of creativity, as the Holy Spirit always does. We simply need to provide the vehicle to channel the gospel through it.

We need a new emphasis on the Lydia People whose hearts the Lord opens (Acts 16:14). Women of leadership and executive skill can mean the break through into new continents of need. The seller of purple businesswoman was a prototype of persons of great potential sharing Christ in every layer of contemporary society.

To these can be added many other forms of challenge. A Cornelius People could supplement the work of Chaplains in a network of nature to those in military service and law enforcement service. A Timothy People (II Timothy 2:2) who take truth and share it with men who in turn teach others could be dealing with the educational world with the thrust of the truth of God. A Luke People could accelerate medical ministries in the name of the Great Physician.

All of this has risk to it. Some of it we are doing. More than this must be done if the mighty deeds necessary to our day are to be done.

III. *The Spirit Must Be Breathed Upon Resource*

The key to the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand was not in the gift of the lad's lunch. Nor was it in the handling of the crowd. The key was in the breath of Jesus blessing the resources to match the need. He looked up into heaven and blessed it before it was distributed to the people. (Matt. 14:19) These are days in which the Spirit of God is breathing afresh across our world. It seems to be in pockets

of spiritual hunger. The moving of God is very profound and electrifying. Whenever he moves, he not only transforms he also opens doors and resources for the forwarding of his reign in the affairs of men.

1. He requires an utter dependence upon Him

Desperation seems to be the key to His moving. The disciples were utterly dependent upon him. They had no way to meet the needs of the hungry multitudes. They could be His instruments of distribution; but they could not create the food. They had no answer.

Across the land men with no answer become fertile ground for God to move. Like Lepers in the siege of Samaria, they are desperate enough to go out into the darkness to find out if anyone is out there. I know what that personal desperation means. I know what that desperation for a family of faith means. It is only in that attitude of absolute dependence that God is freed to move in mighty ways to meet our needs. Our greatest danger is that some successes will sap our awareness of need. He moves to banish our fear, provide for our hunger, change our circumstances, create our victories only when we are aware that we can not do it ourselves.

I have walked in that wilderness longing for the assurance of God. Like Moses one cries for God to let him see His face. Then one asks for a road map that will let him know the way. The answer of God to the desperate spirit is to ignore the request for maps and reject the special privilege of seeing his face. The answer, however, is also to discover the shekinah glory of God in that infilling and to find his footprints all around. And that is Glory!

It is glory to discover God at work convicting of sin and turning people to himself. Young people trusting us because we don't ask about how they look on the outside but what they are on the inside . . . at a World Crossroads because of military training programs we discover God at work among men and women of many cultures bringing them to trust His Son with their lives. Fragmented and broken people are being made whole. In the mystery of His moving, we become aware that the cup of cold water In His Name creates responses around the world.

Desperation knows no class. Rosargentina Pinel-Cordova Smith came from one of the leading families of Honduras. Consul General of Honduras in our city, she is in touch with political power in her country. She had sought God all her life. Two years ago she was desperate. Circumstances closed in on her life. Faithful to the rituals of her religion, she felt abandoned and defeated. A Southern Baptist Missionary, Ralph Wilson, came to get papers cleared. He sensed her yearning and suggested she contact the pastor of the First Baptist Church. She came to church first. The Holy Spirit was powerfully moving. She was at the altar weeping out her need to God. He transformed her into a bold witnessing Christian. The Hurricane Fifi hit Honduras. In its aftermath, God has powerfully moved through her life to touch people of every rank and station in that country.

Desperation knows no class. A fragmented and lonely lady whose husband had abandoned her watched on television. She works at a warehouse in manual labor. She began to write signing her name only as "The Misfit". Weekly letters came from the Misfit. She poured out her hurts and pain. One day she signed a name along with the P.O. Box number through which we had corresponded. Eleanor Weaver was on her way to a family! Gradually, months of contact with our helping people, watching on T.V., and four months ago, Eleanor celebrated new life in baptism. Alienated and alone, she now has a family of faith and an experience of God. The struggle with her feelings will continue, but she is not alone. The Spirit of God has breathed upon her.

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