

Marks of Discipleship: IV – Seeing Possibilities!
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John 6:1-13

A couple of weeks ago, the news was so bad around the world that I couldn't watch TV. It was one of those times that I would have given anything to watch an episode of "I Love Lucy" but the Hallmark channel, in all its wisdom, is now running movies all the time – so no more "I Love Lucy" to start my day off right.

At any rate, what was most distressing at that time was those children trapped in the cave in Thailand. A whole soccer team and their coach trapped deep within a cave, trapped for two weeks with virtually no provisions, no light, not much of anything but each other.

It was a dire situation, and everybody knew it. There was no sugar coating the news. You weren't hearing people saying, "Oh, it's going to be okay. We'll get them out." Instead, there were predictions of utter catastrophe, of the possibility of losing them all, because they were so far in and the path out was treacherous, not to mention the fact that none of the boys knew how to swim, and that just around the corner the monsoon rains would be coming.

Whenever they would show a schematic of just how far in they were, how dark and dank it was, and how the passageways out were sometimes so narrow they wouldn't be able to use diving equipment, my heart would start to race. Thinking about it actually made me feel claustrophobic and I had to distract myself immediately.

It was a horrible, horrible situation and it sure looked like it was an impossible situation to solve – so many were the problems and possible complications. I have a feeling that even the most optimistic of persons had a shadow of a doubt that that team would be rescued. It just didn't seem humanly possible. The odds of it ending well were pretty long.

While it was not a life or death situation, the odds of what needed to happen on that hill where thousands of people hungered that day with Jesus and his disciples were pretty long as well. You heard the story. People had come from far and wide to be near Jesus. The scripture says there were five thousand of them.

And they needed to be fed. Jesus wanted them to be fed, so he turned to his disciples and asked how they would do it. Can you imagine what they thought

when he asked that? “Fed? Fed? You’ve got to be kidding. We came out here just to be with them. Who knew five thousand people would show up? We didn’t even bring food for ourselves, how do you expect us to feed five thousand people?”

Well, they didn’t say that exactly, but they had to be thinking that. Actually, Philip spoke first and told Jesus that even if they had half a year’s salary that would only feed that crowd a little bit.

Then Andrew, Peter’s brother pipes up, and reports that there’s a boy there who has a sack lunch, if you will, consisting of five barley loaves and two fish. Five barley loaves and two fish – for five thousand people. It’s not going to happen. It doesn’t make any sense. Any rational person can see that.

Oh, did they forget who they were talking to?

I think they did, and frankly, too often, I think, so do we – especially in the face of seemingly impossible situations. We are rational thinkers, we like to look at the facts and figures, and we know when something is impossible, don’t we?

Even as Christians, who know what God can do, even as Christians, sometimes we give in to the impossible, and figure out that nothing can be done about it.

You know, back in 1952, J. B. Phillips wrote a book entitled *Your God is Too Small*, and I think he was right. And so does a preacher named Guy Sayles, who wrote this: “Many of us do have a god who is too small. Without knowing it, we have substituted a puny and punitive god for the great and gracious God revealed in the history of Israel and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The substitute god (he maintains) that we’ve fashioned is limited, narrow, and tame – does nothing surprising or amazing – and is boxed-in by our preconceptions.”

He goes on to say, “We don’t expect this diminutive deity to restore, redeem, or transform anyone or anything . . . apparently, a lot us believe in a remote, passive and merely observant God.” (On-line, The Rev. Dr. Guy Sayles, “Our Vast and Loving God,” 7/29/12)

Whether or not you agree with him, throw on top of that the fact that too often we operate out of a sense of scarcity, rather than abundance, and you can see why we sometimes throw up our hands in the face of impossible situations and make that remark which grows more and more popular every day – “It is what it is!”

Well, no it’s not! It’s not! Not with our God! Our God is the God of the impossible and the unexpected. Our God is the One who breathed into life all of

creation – from nothing! Our God is the One who parted the Red Sea and saved his people! Our God is the One who restores sinners, heals the sick, raises the dead! Our God is the One who, out of infinite love for us, his sinful creation, sent his only begotten Son to save us! He sent him as a baby to be like one of us. He saved us through Jesus through his death on the cross, but then conquered death itself through the resurrection of Christ!

If that's not impossible, what is? Conquering death! If God can do that, what can't God do? Nothing is impossible with God.

That's what Jesus wanted those disciples to remember that day on the hillside. He wanted them to see possibilities, instead of throwing up their hands and giving up. You know, the Apostle Paul once said a prayer for the Ephesian Christians that I think says a lot about what Jesus wanted the disciples to know that day. He prayed this: "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." (Ibid).

Jesus wanted the disciples to know the breadth and length and height and depth of God's love and power. So this is what he did. He said, "give me what you have, just give me what you have." They did, and he took what little they had to give him, and made it enough – no, more than enough.

He took those loaves and fish, gave God thanks for them, and then gave it to the disciples to share with the people. And miraculously, every single person was fed and there were leftovers, to boot!

Oh, that that story and other stories in the Bible where impossible things were made possible, would cause us to be people who see possibilities rather than throw up our hands in dismay in tough situations.

Need further proof that God can do amazing things? Did you see the news this week? Did you see those boys on that soccer team and their coach kneeling down and praying in thanksgiving for their unbelievable rescue? Did you see them paying tribute to the one rescuer who died trying to save them?

Despite all odds, despite all the rational reasons that said they couldn't survive, survive they did, because so many people "gave what they had" and God took it and made it enough, and that precious team was saved.

Need still more evidence? Just look around here, at some of the people sitting in the pews with you, and there you'll see story after story of impossible things overcome – dire illnesses and treatments gone through on the way to new

health; broken, estranged relationships, even years and years long, restored; and in a time when the world tells us to get more and keep more for ourselves, for years this church has given to Jesus, as he said, “what we had,” and he has done some amazing things with it.

And I can't help but think about last Good Friday, at that ecumenical “Seven Last Words of Christ” service that was held here including so many churches from around Elkton, hearing Father Nick from Trinity Episcopal Church exclaim that in all his years of ministry he'd heard so much about unity, but never experienced the reality of it until that moment, that service where we were all together as one in Christ. A situation that might have seemed impossible at one time, became a reality through the power of our good and gracious God who always make a way!

And whenever he does, friends, whenever God makes a way, it's a sign for the world of the Kingdom of God, present now, but still yet to come in all its fullness in God's time. It's a sign that facts and figures only show so much, rational thinking only gets you so far – with God all things are possible, even the impossible!

So let me tell you a modern day “fishes and loaves” story. It's something that happened to a pastor named Sharon Hiers. In 2007 Sharon traveled with some students and faculty from the University of the South in Tennessee on a mission to Ecuador. It was a different kind of mission. They weren't going there to build houses or to give free medical care, instead they were going simply to learn about people there who were doing things for their neighbors. She said they stayed in a really nice hotel, with a restaurant on the top floor, workout rooms and a beautiful swimming pool. In other words, they were not roughing it!

Among the group was a young man named Will, who Sharon says was a self-identified atheist. While he didn't believe in God at all, he still had a deep care for people, especially those the world had forgotten. He had spent the previous summer living in a poor community right near there caring for people.

Anyway, Sharon says, he was not content to sit in luxury at the hotel knowing so many were in need all around him, so one afternoon, when they had some free time, he invited Sharon to go with him to see some friends he knew in that poor community a few miles away. Before they left, they stopped in a local bakery and had some lunch, and then with the change they had left over from a \$10 bill, they bought loaves of bread for the family of 10 they were going to visit.

She says that the longer they rode in the cab, the more the scenery changed. Luxury homes were replaced by run down shacks, immaculate streets replaced by trash everywhere, dire poverty was evident everywhere. Will told her that the unemployment rate there was over 80%, mostly due to the lack of education of those who lived there.

When they got to the center of this run-down town, Sharon says there were people everywhere, shuffling the dirt, watching the kids, shading themselves from the sun, and in her words, “we stood at the crest of that hill with our equivalent of five loaves of bread and two fish, looking at all those hungry faces, what we needed was a miracle of biblical proportions.”

She continues: “That afternoon, there was no miracle of biblical proportions. The same number of loaves we showed up with were all the loaves we had to share. Not everyone we saw that day was fed with bread, nor was there anything left over. But something very unexpected did happen. Maybe even a miracle.”

“Will and I visited with family we came to see. We gave them the bread we had purchased, and they were grateful. I knew that, even if I didn’t understand a word they were saying in their native Spanish. We sat with that family for an hour or more. I played with the kids and watched them color as they sat on their dirt floors, smiling with joy.”

Will would translate the conversation for her, and she says that if they weren’t asking about him, what they were talking about was God, and how they knew God loved them and would always provide for them. See? And they pointed to that day’s food, that she and Will had brought.

But it was right at the end of the visit, when they were preparing to leave, that the miracle happened. Sharon said that the mom of the family turned to Will and asked him to pray for them. Will, the avowed atheist. And so, she said, they joined hands, two wealthy Americans and a family of poor, uneducated Ecuadorians – with the atheist in the middle, praying to God. And pray to God he did (Sharon says). She said she had never heard, or maybe felt, a more beautiful prayer in all her life. When he finished, the family said to both of them over and over and over again, “God bless you. God bless you. God bless you.”

In the end, Sharon says, “We had come to visit them, to let them know we cared, to bring them a little something to eat, to make sure they knew they had not been forgotten. And what we received was the presence of Christ in a circle of people unexpectedly gathered together that day . . . I thought we were going to visit a family to show them we cared about who they were, about what they were going through. I never expected what we received: Jesus in the flesh, a circle of his children, no matter age, race, or creed, but the Messiah was in the midst of us.” (On-line, The Rev. Sharon Hiers, “More Unexpected Jesus,” 7/26/09)

Friends, our God is God of impossible situations, making a way where we can’t see it. Whether it’s turning an unbeliever’s heart to deep faith, or feeding thousands on a hillside, our God can do more than we can imagine. So if today, you find yourself facing an impossible situation, please don’t throw up your hands and

say “it is what it is,” rather open up your hands and give God what you have to give – yourself, your heart, your gifts, whatever you have to give, and trust that he will take it and make it enough. He will make a way. For nothing is impossible with God. That, my friends, is the Good News of the Gospel, the Good News for the world. Thanks be to God!

Amen.