

“The Power of Giving Yourself Away”

Mark 6: 30-44



Dr. Will Cotton
Senior Pastor

On this, the 9th of September, I have a special word from the Lord I want to share with you, a word from a simple story that has my attention in a whole new way – a story about 5,000 hungry people, 12 amazed disciples, the multiplying power and grace of God in Jesus, and us: the people of St. Luke’s Lubbock.

I invite you to discover with me “the power of giving yourself away.”

The story begins the way it always does with the miracles of Jesus, with human need, in this case, human hunger. Most of us grew up learning this out of John’s gospel, the version with the cute little boy who brought his sack lunch. That version is the latest one, but Mark is likely the earliest. The disciples talk like church people, “These people really are hungry. Call it a night and have them go get themselves something to eat.” And Jesus says, “You give them something to eat.” The Greek is emphatic, means, “You yourselves give them something to eat.” Then Jesus asks the question, “How much food do you have?” He doesn’t ask, “How much food can you scrounge up from the people?” The issue is what “they” have. They don’t see themselves the way Jesus sees them. They don’t see themselves as people who can make a difference in that crowd of people. Someone else will have to feed them.

So why would God place a congregation in what would become the central part of Lubbock? All around that congregation people hunger for food, yes, but even more for relationship with people who care and for a walk with God that will guide and give value to their lives. They are like sheep lost without a shepherd. And Jesus says to me, to you, and all of us here, “You give them something to eat.” We look around and the number of people who are hungry is too many. Besides those around us are starting to look different and talk with a different accent. Some of them are university students sharing a house. Someone needs to go out to them. Some of them are younger families who can buy more space for their family in an established part of town. Less of them go to church than in some other parts of town. Someone needs to go out to them. And Jesus says, “How much food do you have?” The answer is always the same, “Not enough.” Like the disciples, we live in a world where there is never enough...never enough for the poor, but also...never enough for the rich...or the in between.”

But Jesus doesn’t invite them to give away what they don’t have, but rather what they do have. Why give away what you have and risk having not enough for yourself, when what you have won’t be near enough anyway? One of the disciples, may the more Methodist one says, “If they want it, I guess they can come to us.”

During the past 3 ½ years, St. Luke’s United Methodist Church has been giving herself away in a daring and sacrificial way. We created a second location of ourselves and have invested in it heavily.

During our trip to Austin to leave off Tyler, we had an experience that many of you have shared. We came back to Lubbock, with part of our hearts still in Austin. As we were heading out of Brownwood toward Coleman on the way back, a flash of insight hit me. I said, “Tina, I think I’m starting to understand how the Memphis campus feels.” She said, “What do you mean?” I said, “We feel like the Memphis location of St. Luke’s. Part of us is in a remote location and that will cost us for a long time. Our resources are

going there because we believe in what is over there and what is over there is part of us, but in a different way than it has been. There is grief and loss in that.” You see, the Cottons will never again be what they were for the first eighteen years of Tyler’s life. Similarly, in three years that will happen to us again with Reece. The Cottons, in these two transitions, that are as natural to life as can be, have a choice. They can choose to bemoan the things that have happened, the decisions decided, and the investments made and say, “Woe is us!” In the words of my Mexican-American friend, Eduardo Rivera, “Let the pity fiesta begin!” Or the Cottons can choose, in light of the fact that there is no returning to where they have been, to become new, something they have never been before.

The mission design for starting the second campus was to begin it with only 35 people and have the rest of the people come from outside St. Luke’s. What I and those who planned it didn’t know was that there were many more than that who saw themselves as part of our mission to the southwest. Some chose to do it because of style of worship, friendship ties, convenience to their homes, and many, because they felt called of God. The result is that the impact felt here at Memphis has been stronger than we intended.

I know that there are others who are saying, “I’m just waiting to go there when the buildings are built. It’s right in my back yard.” For the sake of St. Luke’s Lubbock, I must hold up a caution flag. The southwest campus is our mission, not our migration. If we merely redistribute according to preference or convenience, we will have failed our mission. The southwest campus is there to reach people for Jesus Christ, and that is the only noble reason to go there. In truth, it is the only eventual true reason to go to this location, as well. This is really a very good time for all of us to ask in our heart of hearts a question, “Why has God called us to be part of St. Luke’s Lubbock?” Is it for me and what I want...or is it for reaching the people that Christ wants? There are large numbers of people who, over the next 5-10 years, will be moving to the Southwest and we want to meet them with the greatest love of their lives. But we are not free to abandon God’s call because it means reaching people who might be different or because it will challenge the way we have always been. We must determine this very day whether we will be faithful to God and whether who we are and what we do will be pleasing to him. If ease was the nature of following God’s call, Jesus would have chosen a different way than the cross. The Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus sweat as great drops of blood demonstrated how part of him wished he could choose differently. How he wished he could have. And it was because of you that he chose the way he did and it because of those around us in both locations, we must choose the way we do.

Having said that, the task before us to become new remains. We live in a time when many churches have left our area of the city and relocated mainly to the southwest: Monterey Church of Christ was the most recent one and Bacon Heights Baptist has made the decision to do the same. These churches are choosing to become new by relocating. That discussion was part of discussions here about 7 or 8 years ago. The decision to relocate is an interesting one. As one church planter said to me, “Churches should relocate if they are no longer going to reach the people in their community, either because they cannot or will not. That way somebody else can move in that will.” Several of Lubbock’s relocated churches have done very well: First Church of the Nazarene, Southcrest Baptist, Second Baptist, Monterey Church of Christ. Their debt structures are extremely high, but there has been new vitality and more people in the pews.

It was the decision of St. Luke’s, six years ago, to choose a different path, to become a multi-site congregation. What were our motivations for doing such a crazy thing? Was it because we had so many sacred moments here and had enough people attending that we could not leave or didn’t want to leave? Was it so we could keep doing business as usual and the southwest a place where people could do things differently and not disturb the rest of us? For a few it might have been that, but those motivations are no better than relocating because we don’t want to do what is necessary to reach the people around us anymore. Or did we create the multi-site congregation because we were so gripped by the gospel to continue reaching people for Christ from the center of Lubbock that we wanted to create a second base of

ministry operations, so that we could dynamically and enthusiastically reach people from here and from there? That's why Tina and the boys came to St. Luke's, and I hope that's why you are here. And that's what we have been working on with you for nearly five years: healing our hurts from division, planting a second campus, and reinventing the direction and style of the home campus so that it will have a faithful and long-term future. The first two are in place. Reinventing ourselves at the Memphis while inventing ourselves at the Southwest is in progress and remains.

Reinvention is difficult, slow, risky, painful and absolutely essential for long-term health of any organization or movement, and the church is both an organization and a movement, always asking the question, "How can we reach more people with the life-giving love of Christ?" When that ceases to become the driving force of who we are, we cease to be the Church. When we cease to be people who ask "What could my five loaves and two fish become in the hands of Jesus," we cease to be useable for the Lord.

Some of you have asked, "When are we going to quit talking about feeding the 5,000 and start doing it? When are we going to move from vision to action?" You have heard some of the action that is taking place already.

Action 1: The "God's Vision, Our Mission" campaign was a wonderful success, raising commitments of nearly \$1.7 million. It involved leadership in a broad scale from both campuses and we moved ahead as a church. Would we have liked to have raised more? I think we would say that for all our family incomes. But God blessed us in a way that is nothing short of amazing. Monies are being received ahead of schedule and it's time that we celebrated that.

Action 2: The Building Committee is now moving to more detailed plans and a Church Conference is scheduled for December 16th. If that plan is approved, we could be breaking ground early in 2008. In a time of rapidly escalating building costs in the Lubbock area, our building committee has done tremendous work and its time that we celebrated that.

Action 3: We continue to bring on staff that will help us become new for a new day at the Memphis and facilitate the continued growth at the Southwest. We are thrilled to have Andy Coward and his family. They have already bought a home here and more importantly, they have made a home here. And it's time we celebrated that. Speaking of staff, Matt is out doing a reconnaissance mission today, listening to a potential contemporary worship and university ministries candidate at an undisclosed location. Christian education developments are also being hatched. I want to celebrate the great work of our Staff-Parish Relations Committee in those efforts.

Action 4: Under the leadership of Eddie Allsup, our Evangelism Committee is enthusiastically get ready for a major outreach initiative. You know about "Bring a Friend" Sunday and we hope you are bringing somebody. It will make your day. But there is also a major push happening on the airwaves of Lubbock. In cooperation with the Finance Committee and our Church Staff, we are doing two advertising blitzes for the next year. One of them is already in place. Give a listen to what many of you have already heard on the radio. [Play the ad]. We are also putting the final touches on a television ad, one for each location, that will be playing on FOX, WB, Lubbock TV, Telemundo, and FOX Weather. Door-knocking efforts are also around the corner more from the Memphis than the southwest. We are committed to making St. Luke's no longer the best kept secret in Lubbock.

Action 5: The "Gospel According to Baseball" Series was just one way we will be adding to creativity, enthusiasm and broader participation in worship. We are creating better flow between different styles, particularly in the 10:50. That would not be possible, without the wonderful leadership of our choir, our organist, our pianist, and the various musicians that are lending assistance. Yes, the orchestra is coming

back, being rebuilt for special occasions and then for more regular service. Becoming new in worship also means that at the southwest, we are looking at a much edgier service to meet a different group of people with the gospel.

I could go on, but time does not allow. The things developing in ministry with children and in other parts of Christian education are just forming, but it will be really good. These are just some of the ways we are putting our loaves and fish into the hands of Jesus.

The feeding of the 5,000 was a great event for the 5,000 and their families, but the event was for somebody else, in fact several somebodies. Jesus said to the disciples, "You give them something to eat." The disciples said, "Send 'em home!" The disciples were the ones who asked, "What are these loaves and fish among so many?" Jesus told the disciples, according to the gospel of Mark, "Organize them for quick feedings in groups of 50 and 100." Jesus blessed the bread and the fish and it was enough. How many disciples collected the leftover baskets and discovered what happens when they gave away "the bread of life?" And how many baskets did they collect of those leftovers? There were twelve. Why is that detail of the story necessary? It is there because it said something about those 12 disciples and who they could become and the impact they could have as they gave themselves away in the name of the living Christ. It's about 21st century disciples at St. Luke's who are willing to do the same and then watch and be amazed.

During the next few months, you will be invited to be part of efforts that literally shape and change people's lives. You will be asked to knock on doors. You will be asked to lead children's worship and teach in classes, when you thought you couldn't or weren't young enough or experienced enough. You will be asked to do and sing things in worship you haven't before. You will be asked to reach out in ways that will stretch your faith and interrupt your comfort. But here is what I know and on which I stake my ministry. When churches decide to become new, the people in them become new.

We have been building the foundation and we have paid some of the price and its time to move forward in giving ourselves away. And what will Christ do? I suggest we start looking for some baskets, lots of them!