

“You Have Got to Be Kidding”

Mark 6:30-44 ¹

Before we were allowed to begin work on our dissertations, Ph.D. students at Southern Seminary were—and I presume still are—required to undergo several days of agony known as “comprehensive exams.” These exams were intended to demonstrate that we had, in fact, learned something during the previous three years.

One of the areas in which I was to be tested was New Testament, and one of the professors with whom I had to take these exams was Dr. Gerald Borchert. When I went to talk with him about the exams, Dr. Borchert gave me a list of twenty long and difficult books for which I would be responsible, none of which we had read in the courses I’d taken with him.

I protested, “Dr. Borchert! **You’ve got to be kidding!** I’m not a New Testament major! This is my *outside* area!” And he responded, “Yes, I know. If you were a New Testament major, it would be forty books.”

George Dantzig was a graduate student in statistics who arrived late to class one day to find two problems written on the board. The problems were actually quite famous as “unsolvable problems” in statistics, but since George had come in late, he didn’t hear that explanation, and he assumed that this was their homework.

George went to work, and he eventually solved both problems. When his professor ecstatically told him what he’d done, George responded, “They did seem to be a little harder than usual.”

You’ll not be surprised to learn that George Dantzig had a renowned career in statistics. Reflecting on those two problems on the board, he later observed that “If someone had told me that these were famous unsolved problems, I probably [would have said, **You’ve got to be kidding me,** and] wouldn’t even have tried to solve them.”² There are actually quite a lot of “You’ve Got to Be Kidding Me” stories in the Bible, and our Scripture this morning contains one of the famous ones.

Just after Jesus learned that Herod had executed His cousin, John the Baptist, His disciples returned from their two-by-two preaching and healing mission in Galilee, and they all needed some space in which to process all that had just happened. Jesus took them by boat across the northern end of the Sea of Galilee to a remote area where they might debrief together.

But many people recognized them and saw them leaving, and people from many towns ran ahead along the shore and got there ahead of them. Jesus saw the huge crowd as he stepped from the boat, and he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on June 11, 2017. Parallel passages are Matthew 14:13-21, Luke 9:10-17, and John 6:1-13.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke. Digital Version.

² From Mark Batterson, *The Grave Robber* (Baker Books, 2014), pp. 103-104.

Late in the afternoon his disciples came to him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go to the nearby farms and villages and buy something to eat” (Mark 6:33-36).

Jesus’ response floored them: **“YOU feed them.”**

“You have got to be kidding!” they replied. It would take *months* of work—about eight months, they estimated—to make enough money to feed all these people!”

This is, of course, the account of what we usually call “The Feeding of the 5,000,” and it is the only one of Jesus’ miracles that is recorded in all four Gospels. Putting all four accounts together, this is what we see

The crowd was swelling by the minute as pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for Passover turned aside to see what was going on. The Gospels tell us that there were 5,000 men in this crowd, which likely means that with women and children there were between ten and fifteen thousand people who needed a meal.

As He looked at this crowd, Jesus turned to Philip and asked, “Where can we buy bread to feed all these people?” (John 6:5). Philip was a logical person to ask, because he was from Bethsaida, a few miles away, and he knew the neighborhood. But Philip responded, “Lord, even if there were enough bread in town for us to buy, and even if we had a way to get it here, eight month’s wages wouldn’t buy enough bread for this many people to have even a bite, much less a meal!”

While Philip protested, Peter’s brother Andrew approached Jesus to report that he’d found a young boy who wanted to help. The word used to describe the boy seems to indicate that he was rather young. Perhaps he had asked his mother for permission to be gone all day so that he could see and hear this Jesus about whom everyone was talking. His mother no doubt told him that he was too young to understand or to enjoy what he would find, but he had pestered her, as children will, and finally she had agreed for him to go. She made up a little bundle of food, enough to see a boy through the day, and let him go.

When the lad arrived where Jesus was, he pushed his way through the sea of grownups and stood as near as he could get to this great Teacher—close enough to hear Jesus’ question to Philip. Maybe the boy knew Andrew, because Andrew was also from Bethsaida. And so, not realizing the magnitude of the task for which he was volunteering, the boy generously offered what he had to Andrew.

The boy really didn’t have much to offer—five small barley loaves and two small fish. Barley bread was the cheapest of all breads, the food of animals and of the very poor, and was held in contempt by people of means. The fish were probably no larger than sardines. Two of them were barely enough to give a little flavor to the dry barley bread.

It was an impossible situation. There were so many hungry people, and the cost for meeting their need was so great. The boy’s lunch was ridiculous in comparison. Andrew could have said to the boy, **“You have got to be kidding me!”** . . . but he didn’t.

When the boy offered his lunch, Jesus had the crowd sit down so they could be more easily served. Jesus had now committed Himself to doing something, and people began to wonder what was about to happen.

Jesus took what the boy offered, thanked the Father for it, and had the disciples begin to distribute it. Can you imagine the wonder of the disciples as they passed the baskets of food

down row after row of people? Each person took as much as he or she wanted, and yet when the basket reached the end of the row, it somehow still held as much food as when it started!

And when all were fed and the job was done, the twelve disciples gathered up twelve baskets full of bread that was left over—one for each of them. There was no waste, and there was no stinginess. God always leaves us, if we follow His guidance and use the resources He has entrusted to us as He intends, with enough to meet our need (2 Corinthians 9:8).

I wonder what the boy did when he got home that night. I'll bet he burst into the house with his eyes shining and his cheeks on fire and breathlessly told his mother about "the miracle that Jesus and I did"! And his bold claim would have been absolutely true.

Remember, too, the boy's mother who had remained at home at her normal tasks, but whose permission and provision had set the stage for a tremendous miracle. Daily routines and tasks may seem repetitive and uneventful, but if a parent—in this case, a mother—intentionally gives herself to the godly shaping of her children's character, it really is true that "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world."

The miraculous "feeding of the 5,000" is a powerful reminder that God is well able to meet great need even when our resources are meager. And Jesus not only meets our needs, but meets them with generous measure. These ten to fifteen thousand people had not only enough, but as much as they wanted. By this miracle, God showed us that if we offer Him whatever we have, however limited, He is able to give it back to us with a spiritual potential that we never dreamed it could convey.

Now I don't know about you, but when I listen to the news, read the news, or watch the news these days, it's easy for me to think of Jesus' Great Commission to "go into all the world and preach the Gospel" (Matthew 28:18-20) as nearly as hopeless as the disciples felt about feeding 10,000 or so people their dinner. In the words of Longfellow's famous hymn, "And in despair I bowed my head: 'There is no peace on earth,' I said, 'for hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men.'"³

The next verse, of course, is of a different sort: "Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: 'God is not dead, nor doth He sleep; the wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, good will to men.'" The challenge for us who follow Jesus—today, as long ago by the Sea of Galilee—is to allow Him to renew our vision so that we see and join what He is doing in the world in our time.

Some of you have recognized the background of this morning's *PowerPoint* as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza from Miguel de Cervantes' famous novel, *Don Quixote*.⁴ And, whether you've read that story or not, I expect that you know the most famous song from the theater version of the book:⁵

To dream the impossible dream,
To fight the unbeatable foe,
To bear the unbearable sorrow,
To run where the brave dare not go.

³ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*.

⁴ Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *The Ingenious Nobleman Mister Quixote of La Mancha* (1605, 1615).

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Man_of_La_Mancha

To right the unrightable wrong,
 To love, pure and chaste, from afar,
 To try when your arms are too weary,
 To reach the unreachable star.

This is my quest, to follow that star,
 No matter how hopeless, no matter how far;
 To fight for the right, without question or pause,
 To be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause.

And I know if I'll only be true to this glorious quest,
 That my heart will be peaceful and calm when I'm laid to my rest.

And the world will be better for this,
 That one man scorned and covered with scars,
 Still strove with his last ounce of courage,
 To reach the unreachable star!⁶

It's a wonderful song; and these days, such "impossible dreams," such "You've Got to Be Kidding Me" goals, are often called "BHAG's," or "Big, Hairy, Audacious Goals." For our purposes this morning, let's call them "Big, Holy, Audacious Goals."

We are entering a season together here at CBF in which **we need to be listening for some "You've Got to Be Kidding Me" kinds of guidance from our Lord for the next ten or twenty years.** We're beginning the process of searching for a new Associate Pastor to serve in this place for what we hope will be a significant portion of his or her life. What is God calling us to do as a congregation that will be big enough to cause someone to want to join their lives to that cause? What is God calling us to do that will be big enough to cause US to want to join our lives to that cause?

We do well to remember that our goal is not ultimately to get people to "come to church." We're trying to introduce them to a vital, intimate, personal, transforming relationship with the Living God! We're trying to show others how to "dance" with God, and our goal in the dance is to follow God's lead, to step in the direction and with the motion God is using in this place, in our time. Our goal is to discover where God is at work already and to join God in that work. Our goal is to recognize the spiritual wave God is building under us and to dare to ride that wave.

One of the first things we have to do to reach people is to *love* them—not as means to our ends, but as ends in themselves, because God loves them. There are thousands of people in Columbia who are quietly searching for something that will give their lives purpose; searching for something that will relieve the burden of their hidden guilt; searching for something that will bring healing to their secret brokenness.

And whether we are young or old as we sit here this morning, God calls us to live out on the cutting edge, on the end of the limb, on that boundary where the Kingdom is advancing, where lives are being transformed. We do this by being willing to imagine, support, and participate in reaching those who have not yet come to faith, whose vision for their lives is not yet the wonderful vision God has for them.

⁶ Joe Darion and Mitchell Leigh, "The Impossible Dream."

So what might such Big, Hairy, Audacious Goals look like? Well, in ten years' time, and maybe sooner, I'd love for people in Oakland Mills and around Columbia to say, when they learn that we're a part of CBF, "Oh, wow! That's the church that:

- Is so very, very friendly and welcoming;
- Is so encouraging and helpful to the families of Oakland Mills;
- Has such wonderful programs and activities for the youth of Oakland Mills;
- Is so generous to those who have material needs in our neighborhood;
- Has mentors in every school in Oakland Mills;
- Helps to start new churches in Baltimore;
- . . . you can fill in more blanks yourself.

If your first thought is that "we can't get there from here," then these may qualify for Big, Holy, Audacious Goals. BHAGs of this sort are things that won't happen unless God shows up.

When we remember the disciples as they faced that crowd, they had many more resources than the boy had, but they believed that they didn't have enough, so they didn't give anything at all. The boy, undaunted, gave what little he had, and his availability made all the difference.

With the disciples, we need to see, remember, and believe that we can accomplish things we have never dreamed of doing through the power Jesus makes available to us. We may be sorry that we don't have more to bring to Jesus, but that is no reason for failing and refusing to bring *what we do have* to Him. Little is always much in the hands of Jesus. What we have is enough.