

## **MEALS WITH JESUS: Hope**

**Luke 9:10-17**

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**Rev. Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO**

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One of the more frustrating feelings for me is to have a problem needing a solution and to hear from my mouth or the mouths of others, “I’ve got nothing.” Have you ever been in that situation? You’re in a meeting about a big project or problem at work, and the boss looks at you and asks, “Whada ya got?” And the only answer you have is, “Nothing. I’ve got nothing.” Or you’re burdened by a need in the community or your family, and when people ask what you can do to help, sometimes your only answer is “Nothing. I’ve got nothing.”

Nothing can be such a hopeless word.

You’re sitting in the doctor’s office or the ER waiting room, and the doctor says, “I’m sorry. There is nothing more we can or could do.”

You’re searching for work or housing but return in the evening to your family and hear the question, “Any luck today?” And your only response is, “Nothing.”

Before our text today, the twelve disciples had just returned from being sent out on a mission by Jesus. Jesus had given them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases. He had appointed and authorized them to proclaim the kingdom of God and heal the sick. Jesus told them to take nothing with them. No staff, bag, bread, money – not even extra clothes. Where they are welcome, stay. Where they are not, shake the dust off their feet and move on. The scriptures say they did as Jesus told them, bringing good news and curing diseases everywhere, even though they started with nothing.

That must have been a rush, a high. To be charged with working miracles with nothing and to see those miracles happen.

They return to Jesus right after that mission, and there is a crowd to feed. Jesus tells them to take care of it, to feed them, and the disciples look at one another, then look at Jesus, and say, “with what? We’ve got nothing.” The dust from their mission of miracles is still on their sandals, yet they’ve already forgotten what Jesus can do with nothing.

“Nothing” sounds hopeless to us, too. But sometimes, nothing is everything.

Someone recently shared with about a woman who came into a vet clinic with two very sick dogs. The bill was more than she had, but she used the remaining amount on her medical benefits card, as she was allowed, to pay what she could for these beloved pets. When she left, a man in the clinic with his pet, having overheard the conversation, came to the desk to pay his bill and said, “I want to pay her bill, too.” Her bill alone was \$625. He paid it all. The staff were

shocked. Imagine what that woman must have thought when the clinic called to tell her what had happened, and when she asked, in shock and confusion, “but what do I owe?” she heard, “Nothing! You owe nothing. It’s been paid in full.”

Or when I feared the dark growing up, my parents would come to check on me at night, finding me still awake. They’d ask, “What are you afraid of, Melissa?” and I’d list all the wild things my imagination told me might happen in the dark of night. They’d tuck me in tighter, snug as a bug in a rug, and say, with compassion, “There is nothing to be afraid of, Melissa. Nothing.”

I read the story of a church that gathered on Confirmation Sunday, and each of the confirmation students had memorized part of Romans 8 from Paul’s letter to the Romans. They were to recite the passage from memory to the church and families gathered on that Sunday.

The students stood in a line, robed and ready, and their teacher said to the first student, “George, what shall separate you from the love of God?”

George recited Romans 8 – “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39, NIV)

George beamed. His parents were so proud.

The teacher moved on. “Mary, what shall separate you from the love of God?”

Mary recited Romans 8.

But as they moved down the line, the congregation grew nervous. At the end of the line was Rachel, a child of grace with an easy, bright smile. But as a child living with Down syndrome, could she memorize and recite Romans 8?

The question finally got to her. And the teacher asked, “Rachel, what shall separate you from the love of God?”

She smiled that familiar, bright smile and said just one word, “Nothing.”<sup>i</sup>

Jesus told his disciples, “You give them something to eat.”

And the disciples said, “We have nothing **but** five loaves and two fish, Lord.”

If we were in youth group and I was still the youth pastor, I’d crack a joke about what Jesus can do with small butts. However, since we’re not in youth group, I won’t say that joke. I’ll say this instead: What looks hopeless to us looks hope-full to Jesus.

Jesus shows them just what he can do with nothing. This Gospel miracle of the feeding the five thousand is the only miracle recounted in all four Gospels. There are slight variations in the four accounts, such as the Gospel of John being the only one to mention the fish and loaves belonging to a little boy. But there are common threads among all four.

- Jesus goes to a certain place and is met by a great crowd, numbering at least 5,000 but much more as scripture says 5,000 men, meaning women and children are present but not included in the count.
- There is a need to feed the crowd.
- Only five loaves and two fish are available.
- The people are told to sit.
- Jesus takes the bread and offerings a blessing, gives thanks.
- The food is distributed.
- All people eat until their hunger is satisfied.
- Twelve baskets of leftovers are collected.

Thousands gathered in a “remote place” where Jesus taught and healed them. When it came time for the evening meal, there was nothing for people to eat except five loaves of bread and two fish. From these, Jesus provided food for the whole crowd. He miraculously multiplied the amount of food so that everyone was well-fed, and there were still leftovers. This was not a meal Jesus was invited to like some of our other meals in this sermon series. Jesus was the host of this meal. This was his meal.

Luke tells us, “When the crowds found out about it, they followed him, and he welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God and healed those who needed to be cured.” (v. 11)

Welcoming is the action of a host who receives their guests. Luke has a special interest in hospitality and includes Jesus’ teaching on being a host in chapter 14, where Jesus teaches, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” (14:12-14)

On that hillside, Jesus practices what he preaches, welcoming all 5,000 plus to his meal, where out of compassion, Jesus takes what the disciples call nothing, looks up to heaven, breaks, blesses, and gives it back to the disciples. He tells them to give it to the crowd. And all, regardless of gender, status, position, or abilities, all ate until they were completely satisfied. And there was an abundance left over.

While the feeding of the hungry is most certainly an act of compassion, it is also a powerful demonstration of God’s kingdom in the here and now. Jesus provides. All are welcome and in

need. There is more than enough for all. It was also a taste of the familiar story of God providing manna for the children of Israel as they journeyed through the wilderness (Exod. 16:1-36). And it had the aroma of Old Testament prophetic promises, such as are found in Isaiah:

In Jerusalem, the LORD of Heaven's Armies  
will spread a wonderful feast  
for all the people of the world.  
It will be a delicious banquet  
with clear, well-aged wine and choice meat.  
There, he will remove the cloud of gloom,  
the shadow of death that hangs over the earth.  
He will swallow up death forever!  
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away all tears. (Isa. 25:6-8, NLT)

Nothing can separate us, not even death, for the LORD has swallowed up death forever! When someone asks us what can separate us from the love of God, we can respond like sweet Rachel and say with confidence, Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

In the beginning of God's grand story, there was nothing. But God took the nothing and created something abundant and beautiful.

Then, the arms of Abraham and the womb of Sarah held nothing as they neared the end of life. No children, no heirs. But God took the nothing and created a people abundant and beautiful.

Then, the people struggled in captivity, with no freedom or restoration. But God took the nothing and created new beginnings and fresh starts for God's people.

Then, God became nothing, entering our world as a baby. Jesus grew in every way and healed, fed, and taught about the kingdom of God come near to us. He threatened the empire and was murdered like a common thief upon a cross. But then God took what looks hopeless to us, death itself, and created victory over death forever.

What looks hopeless to us looks hope-full to Jesus.

Right now, you may feel like you have very little to offer. We sometimes even say to ourselves or others, "I have nothing left to give." Sometimes, we even believe, "Not only do I have nothing, I am nothing."

My friends, what looks hopeless to you looks hope-full to Jesus. This is what it means to be people of faith. If God can take the formless void and create the beauty and splendor of the multiverses, how much more can God do with us? If God can take the empty arms of an aging couple and create descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, how much more can God do in us? If Jesus can take the nothing the disciples offered and feed the crowds with plenty left over, how much more can God do with the offering of our lives? If God can take the nothing of

death and create a doorway to life everlasting in God's presence and a new heaven and earth, how much more can God do with what appears dead in our lives?

What looks like nothing to us, Jesus can take, break, bless, and give back to us in abundance, not for our self-focused pleasure or privilege but for the glory of God and the good of the world.

For those familiar with this story, we almost always see ourselves in the disciples or even the little boy who brings his lunchable to Jesus. But, sometimes, friends, we are seated among the 5,000+ on the hillside, desperate for food, healing, and hope from Jesus. We are the disabled, the broken, the hungry, the poor, the overlooked, the marginalized, and the seeking who have been invited to the feast as honored guests by the host, Jesus. There is more than enough for us, too. Out of compassion, Jesus meets our needs and offers us hope. Then, Jesus invites us to join him in hosting the feast of the kingdom in the here and now, learning from Jesus what it means to be a host who welcomes all people, no matter who they are, where they come from, or what they struggle with. We are demonstrating the kingdom of God in the here and now as we host one another for meals of food and hope.

"Nothing" sounds hopeless to us sometimes. But sometimes, nothing is a good thing. A very good thing. There is nothing that can separate you from the love of God. And there is nothing you can do to earn and deserve God's love. It is freely given to you. Like the lady at the Vet Clinic whose debt was paid, you owe nothing. Your debts have been paid in full by Christ. That is grace. May we receive it, trust it, be grateful for it, and extend it to others as freely as it has been given to us.

Whatever looks or feels hopeless in your life or the world around you right now, bring it to Jesus because what looks like nothing to us can be everything to Jesus. What looks hopeless to us looks hope-full to Jesus.

Melissa Hatfield © 2023<sup>ii</sup>

All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

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<sup>i</sup> Tom Long, from a sermon called "Standing on the Promises" found here:

<https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/audio-sermons/standing-on-the-promises-a-sermon-from-genesis-18-by-tom-long/>

<sup>ii</sup> I'm indebted to Jonathan Davis for his inspiration around the concept of the difficult and the good of "nothing." His sermon on the Matthew text of the feeding of the five thousand strongly influenced my sermon, especially the beginning and ending reflecting on the theme of nothing.

<https://jdshankles.wordpress.com/2020/08/03/sunday-august-2nd-2020-nothing-a-sermon-on-matthew-1413-21/>