

NOT A 7-11 IN SIGHT

Yesterday, Linda and I drove down to Mount Vernon, New York, to pick up some medications for my in-laws. While we waited for the prescriptions to be filled, we looked for a place to find some breakfast. Nothing looked familiar—most of the restaurant names were in Portuguese or Spanish and they didn't appear to be open. We ended up at the ever present and universally familiar Dunkin' Donuts and dined on coffee and breakfast treats. It is often hard to find something to eat in an unfamiliar place!

Author Lowell Streiker tells about a time when he was on a twelve-city book tour promoting his latest work. He was rather weary and very homesick when he went to a diner one morning for some breakfast. The waitress on duty walked up to his table to take his order. As she stood there with her pad he said, "I'd like to have scrambled eggs, rye toast, decaf coffee and some kind words.

He writes: "She was back in a few minutes with the eggs, toast and coffee. As she started to leave I touched her arm and said, "Miss, I appreciate what you brought, but I've been traveling for six weeks and I need those kind words more than I need anything else."

"She leaned toward me," concludes Streiker, and whispered, "Don't eat them eggs." (*An Encyclopedia of Humor*, 346)

Ah yes, the joys of eating on the road. When we travel, when we're far from home, finding something to eat can be a bit of a gamble. In certain parts of the country you'll come across signs advertising restaurants that say "Last Eats for Fifty Miles." I always find such signs a bit unnerving—not quite as bad as the sign on Interstate 84 near Fishkill that says—"Correctional Facility Area—Do Not Stop Your Car"—but still unnerving. Whenever I see one of those "Last Eats" signs I wonder, what if the car breaks down? What if I run out of gas? What if I suddenly get a bad case of the munchies? Those of us who live in highly populated places like metropolitan New York usually find it a bit disconcerting when we are far from any restaurant, far from any supermarket. It sets a bit on edge when there's not a 7-11 in sight!

That's probably how it was for the great crowd that had followed Jesus into the desert. They came from what William Barclay describes as "a thickly populated area" on the Western shores of the Galilean Lake. The region had over 200 villages, tightly packed into a tiny space. (*Daily Study Bible: Matthew II: 115*) They were used to having lots of resources close at hand. But on the *eastern* shore in the desert, things were rather sparse. They were probably a good day's journey from home.

All day they had been held spellbound as Jesus healed the sick. They were in no hurry to go back, they wanted to see more—but they are, no doubt, getting hungry.

Now the disciples are used to being on the road. They have a few supplies with them, probably some wine, and a bite to eat. Yes, they are hungry too, but let's give them the benefit of the doubt. Let's say they are being polite. They don't want to eat in front of the folks in the crowd, who appear to be without food. So they approach Jesus to see if he can do something about it.

Maybe it was James who pointed to the setting sun. Maybe Peter commented on how far they were from civilization. Then another one of them speaks: "This is a deserted place, [Jesus] and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." (Matthew 14:15b)

It makes sense. It's logical. But Jesus has other ideas. He wants them to learn about trusting in God. He wants them to learn about taking care of one another's needs. He wants the disciples to learn how to share.

"They need not go away," he tells the disciples, "You give them something to eat." (Matthew 14:16)

No doubt they look at one another rather perplexed.

"Have we got anything?" asks Peter.

"Well, we've got a bit of bread in my sack," says James.

"And I've got a couple of salted fish," says John, "but that's it."

Peter reports back to Jesus.

"We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." "Bring them to me," says Jesus (Matthew 14:17-18)

They do.

Jesus has the crowd settle down. Offers grace. Hands the food to the disciples to distribute and then watches as it just keeps multiplying. Soon everybody's had enough to eat, and there are leftovers to boot!

Now we could get sidetracked with questions about the miracle itself. Did it really happen? How did it happen? Why don't such things happen today? Personally, my favorite theory is that many of the folks in the crowd really did have food with them, but they didn't want to risk bringing it out into the open because they might have to share it. But when they see Jesus and the disciples share their meager supper, they are inspired to do the same.

But that's just a theory. And while these questions are very real—and very important—they can also sidetrack us. For if we get too caught up in such academic questions, we may miss the foundational spiritual truth this text teaches: when we are willing to share, our efforts are multiplied. One gift can lead to another, to another, until everyone has been blessed.

I read a story recently about the late great Dr. Albert Schweitzer whose work greatly blessed Africa.

A little boy here in the States had heard about Dr. Schweitzer's efforts, and wanted to do what he could to help. He didn't have much, but when he scrapped together his meager savings he had enough to buy a bottle of aspirin.

One problem, though. He had no way to get it to Africa. But he was a resourceful fellow, so he decided to write to the Air Force. They flew planes over Africa all the time. Maybe they could help out. Maybe they'd fly over Dr. Schweitzer's clinic and drop the bottle of aspirin into the compound.

Of course, they couldn't.

But somehow a radio station heard about the boy's efforts and broadcast a story about the caring youngster.

And folks responded. With the help of the station, enough money was raised to buy four and a half tons of medical supplies to augment his lone bottle of aspirin. And in the end, the government did fly the supplies to Africa. As Dr. Schweitzer put it: "I never thought one child could do so much."

One child who shared what he had—his few coins—his one bottle of aspirin. A young boy who understood better than most adults what Jesus meant when he said, "You give them something to eat."

Ellie Ambrose is a twelve-year-old girl who lives in Nashville, Tennessee. Two years ago she heard Larry Warren, a missionary who works in Africa, talk about the twin problems of starvation and AIDS on the African continent. She was especially upset to learn that some 1.9 million children have HIV/AIDS in Africa, and 18 million children are orphaned because of the disease.

But she was only ten at the time.—and she lived thousands of miles away. What could she do about it?

But she prayed. She prayed for the African children, and she prayed that God might show her what she could do. And in time Ellie had an idea—and she sensed God was telling her to go for it. She would sponsor a race. Folks would pay to enter, and get pledges. And the money would go to help the children. Ellie also

thought about her friends who weren't runners and decided she would also be, as she put it, "lots of fun games for my friends who don't like to run."

Soon Ellie had gotten some adults on board to help out. And finally, last September, "Ellie's Run for Africa" was held. There was a 5K race, lots of games, African dances and good things to eat. In the end Ellie raised \$18,000 and was able to provide 280 students with shoes and school uniforms, build four classrooms in Nairobi and provide two clinics with medical supplies. And the Second Annual Ellie's Run for Africa will be held this coming September. It promises to be even bigger and better. (For further information see www.elliesrun.org)

All because of a little girl who shared her gifts of vision and enthusiasm and hard work. A little girl who understands better than most adults what Jesus meant when he said, "You give them something to eat."

Often as we move through life it appears there isn't a 7-11 in sight. Often it appears as if our resources are too limited, too few, for us to make a difference. And so we clutch them close to our chests, we hoard them and refuse to share. For most of us here our resources are more than we can easily count. We have been given much, and as Jesus said, "From those who have much, much will be expected." (Luke 12:48)

But even if all we have are five loaves and two fish; even if all we have is one bottle of aspirin; even if we are only blessed with vision, enthusiasm and a willingness to work, even if that is all we have, if and when we are willing to use such gifts, God will honor the giving—and it will grow beyond our wildest dreams.

"You give them something to eat," said Jesus. You give them aspirin and AIDS medicines and shelter and shoes for their feet and clothes for their backs. You give them real tangible hope. Even if there isn't a 7-11 in sight!

Amen
John H. Danner