

When being broken brings multiplication

Luke 9

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I gaze loving at my dinner plate filled with gifts from the earth. I am touched, overwhelmed in the truth that everything I eat has in some way had to die so I could live. It is the way of the earth, and I don't truly understand it. Ponder over the truth for a while. It may bring tears to your eyes. And if it does, I encourage you to welcome them. They could be healing.

I gaze more lovingly still. Gratitude overflows. I ask myself a hard question, "What in me must die before I can truly give life to others?" -

It is clear in scripture that in order to be fruitful, to go deeper, to experience Christ on this journey we call the Christian life, something has to die, or become weak, or take a backseat.

This concept of losing something to gain something even greater doesn't make much sense in our minds, in our society or our culture. It takes maturity, wisdom, and insight to fully grasp the idea that in order to move further outward, to have more quality of thought life, and peace within our soul, something in us has to go deeper, has to reckon with ourselves, and eventually has to die.

Paul said, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."* (I Cor 12: 9-10)

*Jesus said, "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies it will bear much fruit. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who **hates his life in this world** will keep it to life eternal."* (John 12:24-25)

Paul in Galatians 2:20 says, *“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”*.

I think Mother Teresa of Calcutta understood this reality of giving oneself for others, she once said, and truly lived this way, *“Put yourself completely under the influence of Jesus, so that **HE** may think his thoughts in your mind, do his work through your hands, for you will be all powerful with him to strengthen you.”*

To do what Mother Teresa is suggesting means a giving up, a relinquishing of self, a release of our own demands and desires that must be handed over to God openly, so that he can begin his transforming work in us.

For all of us the past year has been tough in so many ways. We’ve been told what to do, what we cannot do, how to do things, how not to do things. We’ve been told where we can go, where we can’t go. There has been worry, anxiety, losses, and death. In the first month of the pandemic, Immerse went from a house full of residents to just one resident. Over the next three months we had over \$100,000 in guaranteed revenue lost. It’s not about the money though, we’re still open, though that is not true for many nonprofits and churches and businesses.

Troy and Michelle asked me to share about our journey at Immerse over the past year.

It’s been a year of waiting, of ups and downs, of losses, disappointments and joys. In the midst of such contrast, God has taken us deeper in hearing and discerning and following his voice. I’m sure we’re in good company at Immerse, I’m certain those who have gone before us whether the Mennonite Children’s Home, the Millersville Youth Village and the leaders before me in the International House experienced difficulties, and I’m sure they turned to scripture and the interior life to discern that whatever they were going through, whether tilling or planting or dying, **these things needed to take place for God to use us so that in the death of our little selves, God would do more in us.**

I've read a lot by Henri Nouwen this past year, his reflections usually hit deeply within my soul.
--quote on page 351 of the Blue Book

So, the past year at Immerse we've been asking God to take us deep, to help us discern what we have that he wants us to use.

I've chosen Luke 9:12-17 for our scripture verse for today.

1. "*You give them something to eat*"

- Can you imagine the look on the disciples' faces when Jesus says, as they look at the multitude of people, "***you give them something to eat***".
It seems that a significant amount of doing life and ministry, whether at home or at work, is figuring out what you've got and then figuring out how to give it away.
- At Immerse we've been saying, "*God has given us something unique and specific, something that only we can give*". He may be saying that to you as well. It may feel like only five loaves and two fish among so many problems, difficulties, piles of laundry, your workload at work, etc.
- But in Jesus' hands it is more than enough to satisfy a multitude and still have leftovers.
- In saying, "You give them something to eat". Jesus is saying, "**you will feed them because I gave you something that only you can give**".
- He's given each and every one of us gifts that He wants us to use, in whatever way He's designed those gifts to be used.
- For Immerse, it's been in welcoming people from around the world into our international house and our academic English program, forming community with them, praying for them, helping to meet their needs.

One such student, Janaibi, has been in my wife Joan's Bridge the Gap program, that helps young refugee women with English and tutoring and mentoring as they prepare for college. Joan has poured into the lives of each student in the program.

- When Joan saw these young ladies falling through the cracks as they exited high school, she heard Jesus saying, “*you give them something to eat*”. “**I’ve given you specific gifts to listen to, befriend, help, and to instill hope in these young ladies that they can find their way here in the US. Mentor them, lead them, give them a chance to make in their new home here. Be light to them.**”. So, she works with about three young ladies each year in this program at Immerse. It’s been challenging during COVID, but they have all gone one to realize their dream of higher education.
- **In addition to realizing what Jesus gives us is something that only we can give, there is something else so amazing in these verses that we should be careful not to overlook..**
- After telling them to give the multitude something to eat, Jesus asks the disciples to give him the bread, *He then (1) takes it into his hands, (2) He blesses it, (3) then He breaks it, and then He gives it back. This all sounds good, except the breaking part.*

2. Broken Bread

- I don’t want you to misunderstand me, or think I’m reading too much into these verses, but I see in these verses a unique picture into how God accompanies and completes in us His plan for using us for his Kingdom work.
- **He takes us, blesses us, and when we’re ready to hand our lives over to him, he prunes us / he trims us / he transforms us so that our gifts and time spent ministering to our family, friends, colleagues and neighbors is multiplied – just like the bread.**
- I have seen this repeated over and over in my life, as well as in the lives of those around me.
- One thing that comes to mind is our pursuit of accreditation, which we were recently granted. I hired someone in early 2017 who I thought could serve as our Accreditation Coordinator. This person came highly recommended, had been connected to accreditation at a university. It became clear very early on that this person was not right to lead our accreditation process, and I grieved over what to

do. The person's church, a supporter of Immerse, was also helping us financially with accreditation. As the weeks passed, the relationship with this person became tense. My soul, my sense as a leader, my decision-making felt broken – it was one of the lowest points in my 5 years at Immerse. Additionally, the person had moved into the apartment at Immerse and so we interacted quite a bit each day – we liked this person and the contributions made. However, we tried to make it work, but there were serious issues that ultimately meant the person would need to be let go – ugh.

- It was at that time that I questioned my ability to lead Immerse toward accreditation, and I questioned my own leadership and decision making, it was a very low time for me. I was reassured by God that we were making the right decision by letting this person go, however, I wondered, “what did this 9 month trial with this person mean? Why did I feel so broken?”
- During the time I was involved in the months-long release of the person, I went to EMM's Global Fair at Hans Herr House. A couple approached me that I hadn't seen since our days in SE Asia. It was Donna and Gerry Keener. Donna asked me what I was doing and, as she recounted recently, she didn't know why she said to me that day “I want to visit Immerse and see where I can help out”. The rest is history!
- That was July, in October, God completed our team at Stauffer's on Rohrerstown Road - Ken Davidson!
- *God has taken Immerse into His hands, blessed us, allowed certain pieces to be broken, and then gave it back to us to multiply, and this time it will be through accreditation.*
- Accreditation allows us to apply to the DHS to issue visas to students from abroad, to bring young people eager to study in the USA to Millersville, where we'll have the opportunity to multiply the Good News Jesus has given us to share.

3. Finally, the story of the loaves and fish teach us that when we are the most broken, when it seems we have the least to give, the fact is the opposite is true.

Immerse has a prayer garden with pond and waterfall in it. The space was neglect for years and had become embarrassingly overgrown, problematic, and in some ways, a representation of some of the difficulties Immerse had experienced over the years.

Several years ago several work teams from area churches and businesses came to Immerse to help us revive our overgrown prayer garden with pond and waterfall, tilling, weeding, relining the pond, and finally bringing it back to order.

Michael and Ruthy have become the chief caretakers of the garden, which has become a place of peace and prayer and reflection for students, residents, staff, and community. This past Friday I noticed a woman walking around our property, when I asked if she was looking for someone, she said, “I hope it’s okay but I heard there’s a prayer garden here that I can enjoy for some meditation time – is that okay?” A group from Living Light recently came to help us keep it beautiful for others to enjoy – thank you for helping us keep the garden beautiful and peaceful.

I had a chance meeting with Roberto in the prayer garden last week. He’s a doctor from Cuba who studies in our English program, a student of Troy and Joan who teach at Immerse. He said to me, “*this place is where I can think, meditate, and pray for all that God has for me and my family in this country*”.

I couldn’t help but remember the disarray, the jungle of weeds and mess, and now stand and look with awe over the tranquility that brings peace to Roberto who left untold suffering in Cuba to seek a better life for his family in the US.

- As Jesus demonstrated, *it is in the breaking that the multiplying occurs - just as it will be for many of us.*
- If we really want to have something of depth and substance to give to those around us, it will usually involve some sort of breaking.
- *Again, as I mentioned before, the times when we are the most broken are usually the times when it feels like we have the least to give, but the opposite is actually true.*

It is when we are the most broken that we are the most able to give something of substance and value to those in our lives and world.

I have heard it said that the best counselors and pastors and spiritual teachers are those that have gone through some of the most difficult trials in life.

Chrysanthemum story (darker the night, the brighter the bloom).

- When I have feared for the future of Immerse, of how we will continue to welcome the nations on our campus and have the opportunity to share the love of God with them, it's at those times I remember this story of handing what we have over to Jesus for him to take / bless / break and give back to us to multiply his blessing – and I sit humbly before Him knowing that we are in the best place.
- *This is true because, somehow, in brokenness, it has stopped being about us and our ability to multiply ourselves and it has become about God and his ability to multiply our little loaves and little fish with his strong and tender hands.*
- The Apostle Paul, speaking a language that the world knows not of said, “when I am weak, he is strong”

In closing, there is this pattern in scripture that implies, over and over, that your roots must go really deep before you can be fruitful. I see this pattern in my life, and in the lives of the team at Immerse, when things seem so desperate, or we seem so worn out, discouraged or complacent. It's in those times that Jesus says, “you give them something to eat that only you can give” – this is his pattern. He then takes our gifts and time and talents as bread, he blesses it, breaks it, and then allows us to pass it out to others for their nutrition, and we stand back amazed.

Perhaps you, in these times of discouragement have felt broken. I encourage you to look deep at this pattern. Perhaps Jesus is taking you, blessing you, allowing you to experience the

brokenness of this life, so he can multiply what He's taught you in others, your children, your family, or those in your social circles.

4. I'll close in a short prayer

"Go forth now as God's servant. Remember God's presence often and draw strength from the knowledge that the One who calls and sends, also sustains...Amen" (A Guide to Prayer, Rueben P. Job)

On the Road to Emmaus, the disciples were feeling discouraged from the events of passion week and on their way to Emmaus, although he appeared to them, and answered their questions, they didn't recognize Jesus. He went with them into town, stayed with them and had a meal. At the end of their time together, in a small apartment, Jesus did something that opened their eyes, listen to what Luke says about this encounter:

*They urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "**Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?**"* –Luke 24:29-31

Through these disciples he multiplied fruit throughout history through today, we are partakers of the bread that multiplies...