What parent hasn’t experienced that moment when you get 50 miles into the road trip and realize you left the snack bag on the kitchen counter. The kids may have eaten a huge breakfast, but it doesn’t matter. The minute they know there’s nothing to eat in the car, it’s like blood in the water – they won’t be able to focus on anything else, until you finally give up and pull in for the fast food you swore you wouldn’t eat this trip, but you know you’ll go crazy if you have to listen to them complain for even one more mile.

That’s pretty much how today’s gospel starts out. A huge crowd of people have headed out for the day to get a glimpse of this Jesus character, but they appear to have left their snacks on the kitchen counter back home. The story – which, by the way, is the only story other than the resurrection included in all four gospels – doesn’t include the grumpy comments from the crowd, but I think it’s safe to assume that there was a fair amount of hanger in that mass of empty bellies. And without a nearby Whataburger, the disciples suggest the only thing that makes sense: “Send the crowds away, Jesus, so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.”

I don’t think they meant any harm. They were just being realistic. Night was falling, and they were in the middle of nowhere. They had barely enough food to enjoy themselves, just a few small loaves and a couple of dried fish. Time to take care of themselves, for a change, and they thought everyone else should do the same. And besides, even if they wanted to help, what could they possibly do about it?

I know this feeling, and not only when I have no snacks for my kids in the car. I know it, because it’s how I feel when faced with the big problems of total strangers. You know, someone who is hungry, or homeless, or lost. Foster kids and refugees and prisoners. People who clearly need help – no one’s arguing they don’t – but I’m obviously not the right person to help. I don’t even have what they need! I don’t have the resources or skills or time. I’m not a millionaire!

So, I do what I think a lot of well-intentioned followers of Jesus do in these moments, including, apparently, the original twelve disciples: I ask Jesus to take care of it. “Help them get what they need, Jesus. I can’t help, but I hope you will. And in the meantime, please send them away. Amen.”

Oh, but that Jesus, he has a different idea. He always seems able to see possibilities where we just see limitations. He doesn’t know anything about the space between a rock and a hard place, let along how to get stuck there. And besides, he knows exactly how to help the people we pray to him asking him to help. “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

Now, I get all the reasons why in certain moments we think to ourselves, “Jesus, I’m not the right one for this. I don’t have the resources or the knowledge or the strength. And the problem is so big. I can’t bear to look, Jesus. Won’t you just send them away?” I get it, and Lord knows, I’ve thought it. But I also know we’ve been commanded to love another like Jesus loves, and it’s hard to claim that you’re loving like Jesus when most of what you do is make excuses for not helping the people who need that love the most.

Friends, love is the most powerful force in the world, but in my experience the force of love only ever gets fully unleashed when we get start getting closer to others. We can try to love from afar, but the power of love is not truly unlocked until we get up close and personal. That’s why Jesus says, “They need not go away; you give something to eat.” Because Jesus knows that love is going to be the solution to this problem, just like it’s the solution to every problem, but the power of love to feed the enormous hunger of that huge crowd depends on the disciples’ willingness to get closer to it. Only when they got *closer* to it – not sending it away, not averting their eyes – could Jesus take their meager offering, multiply it, and use it to perform the miracle they needed.

I am no expert in this sort of love, but I’m trying to be better at it. And one of my greatest mentors in expanding my capacity for this sort of love is a man named Bryan Stevenson. Bryan Stevenson is a lawyer, author, and activist, and he’s also one of my contemporary heroes. He founded the Equal Justice Initiative several decades ago to advocate for people on Death Row, and since the early 1990s, EJI has won reversals or release from prison for hundreds of wrongly convicted or unfairly sentenced prisoners. He is also the founder of the Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, which honors the thousands of lynching victims in our nation’s history and is among the most profound places I’ve ever visited. If you don’t know about Bryan Stevenson, I suggest reading *Just Mercy* or watching the powerful film adaption that came out earlier this year.

Because of his brilliance and integrity, Bryan Stevenson is routinely sought out for advice and inspiration. People want to know more about how he’s done it, how he’s made such a difference. They ask him for hope and guidance on how they can make an impact on some of the big, seemingly intractable problems in the world…things like poverty, hunger, racism, and mass incarceration. And what he comes back to again and again is what he calls the “power in proximity.”

“To make a difference,” he says, “we’ve got to find ways to get proximate to the poor and vulnerable. When we isolate ourselves, and allow ourselves to be shielded from the vulnerable and disfavored, we sustain the problems…Too often we wait until we have all the answers before we’ll engage. [But to make a difference], we have to find ways to get closer to the marginalized, even if we don’t have the answers.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Bryan says that too many of us obey that voice in our heads that tells us not to go to the bad part of town. Don’t go where people are poor and hurting, or where there’s crime and desperation. Stay away from those people and places so you’ll stay safe, and so you won’t have to see those hard things. I think it may be the same voice that led the disciples to ask Jesus to send the hungry crowd away. But if we actually want anything to change, Bryan Stevenson says, if we actually want to help make things really and truly better for all people, those of us who care, and who want to obey that foundational commandment to love others like ourselves, are going to have to get closer to just those sorts of people and places. Only then will we unleash the power in proximity; only then will we deploy the full force of love.

“They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

Friends, we’re going to have to get closer to hurting people if we want to help hurting people. We will have to get closer to the hungry and poor, to migrants and prisoners, to homeless kids and traumatized veterans. If we want to love all these hurting and vulnerable people – and it is the Christian’s supreme purpose in life to love hurting and vulnerable people – we will have to get closer, because only then can the full power of love get unleashed and miracles become possible.

Now, I know that a pandemic is an awkward time for me to be talking about getting closer to anyone. After all, we’re not supposed to get any closer than 6’, right, and here I am preaching about the power of proximity!

But even in a time such as this, when physical distancing is essential to slowing the pandemic, we can still choose to pull closer to problems, even if we can’t pull closer to people. We can choose to see the issues that are causing pain in our society, and not jump to our ready-made excuses for why we can’t help. We can choose to see all the proverbial multitudes of our world whose suffering is big and hard and daunting, and we can hear Jesus say to us, “they don’t need to go away, you give them something to eat.”

Ultimately, we don’t have to have it all figured out. Remember, that’s what Bryan Stevenson says. We don’t have to have all the answers or a perfect plan in place. Because faith is not about understanding how Christ is going to perform the miracle, but trusting that he can. What’s important is that we strive to love, and allow that love to pull us closer to one another. Because on the other side of this pandemic, there will be more separation than ever. There will be more fear, and cynicism, and distrust. There will be more excuses available for why we can’t and shouldn’t help. There will be more hurting and suffering people.

And Jesus will standing next to them, inviting us closer, and telling us, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

1. https://fortune.com/2018/06/26/bryan-stevenson-ceo-initiative/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)