

The image of baby birds, bouncing up and down with open mouths in a nest is imprinted in our minds. The scene is all too familiar, and almost comical. They seem to be programmed to start begging for food as soon as anything moves near them. That is dependence to the nth degree!

In the same way every child expects mom or dad to take care of everything. We never thought of anything else but running to mom or dad when we needed, wanted, lacked, or didn't even know how we felt. That is so natural and defines dependence.

Yet birds and babies grow up and the goal of each is to become free from such dependence. That is necessary for survival and the future of the next generation. But sometimes things get in the way, or the plan falls apart. How does that happen?

One day Jesus fed five thousand and then grabbed a quick sail in a fishing boat to head to the other side of the lake. He had done all he could, and more than anyone imagined possible and needed a rest and time of renewal. As quickly as he could he headed for a quiet place, far from the noise and busyness of the world. He needed time in prayer. He needed rest. He needed quiet peacefulness for what was coming next.

But the crowd wouldn't let go. They wanted more; needed more. They were becoming dependent on Jesus' gifts and even meals on wheels for five thousand was not enough. They moved as quickly as they could, keeping Jesus in sight as they walked, ran, and likely struggled to keep up and get to the other side before they lost sight of him. They were not going to leave him alone, for like baby birds they wanted more.

Jesus needed less, only peace and quiet and prayer. But the crowds, even with full bellies, demanded more. Some might even have borrowed boats to race the others who had only their feet to follow Jesus. But they all had one thing in common, they wanted more! More stories. More miracles. They wanted Jesus in the worst way.

Sound familiar? We follow similar patterns. Once we realize how Jesus can offer what we cannot imagine or create, we can easily become dependent in our prayers and begging and expectations. But Jesus came to offer a different kind of nourishment. His mission is to set us free, not make us more dependent on earthly distractions. His goal was not to keep followers from ever being hungry again, but to use a miraculous feeding to proclaim God is in our midst and his love is the greater nourishment.

Consider how easily grace can become an expectation rather than love that sets us free to serve as we have been served. When Jesus fed thousands some felt it was like winning the lottery and the expectation was this is our new norm. Others understood God was in their midst and it was time to reevaluate from that perspective.

We have come to the point in our culture where every want is called a right and anything we don't have should be taken care of immediately. Is that dependency or freedom? You decide! Our welfare system is the envy of the world, yet it could easily become a lifestyle rather than a safety net. On the other hand, some could be jealous

critical of those who are helped rather than rejoice that we have the ability to care for the less fortunate in our midst.

A young mother was an unintended victim of poor medical care. Preventable mistakes led to undiagnosed cancer and ultimately death. Her friends encouraged her to sue to get what she deserved and protect her kids. It was a difficult decision, but her response was simple. She said, "I don't want my children to grow up thinking they can take advantage of someone else just because they made a mistake." That is the struggle this text brings to my mind.

Baptism sets us free from slavery and yet we grumble when it feels like a jungle out there! Communion nourishes us with Christ himself but some miss point of meal and argue about the shape of bread or color of the wine.

Years ago, "expect a miracle" was a popular slogan (as if God will give anything we want if only we demand strongly and often enough.) We criticize laziness and dependency in others yet even faithful Christians fail to see our own slavery to traditions, fears, and earthly stuff.

Israel was granted freedom to learn that even in wilderness they were never alone. God always provided what he knew they really needed. Hungry crowds were fed by Jesus not to free them from food gathering but understand God's power was in their midst. Easter sets us free from death so nothing in life can ever enslave us! Every earthly freedom has a cost. But our dependency on Jesus is the only true freedom in existence, as Jesus has paid the full price, and offers life in his presence as a gift of grace.

Our call is not to hope for more Jesus-magic but to live as people free from sin and death. Faith is not the assurance of earthly gifts but an affirmation that God's loving presence changes our perspective of what we live with or without. There is a reason for a commandment about not coveting what others have. Instead, we are invited to give energy, attention, and focus on what will nourish us and feed the world forever! Such a lifestyle sets us free to use earthly stuff for God's glory not our satisfaction! Isn't it easier to share when we understand our stuff is nothing other than gifts from God?

A familiar proverb states *give someone a fish and they have food for a day. Teach them to fish and they have food for a lifetime.* That is the difference between dependence and freedom! Between looking for pieces to pick up and celebrating gifts that have already been shared.

Maybe our list of needs is a barometer of faith! When that list is all consuming, faith gets left in the dust. When faith is the focus of our living our list of demands quickly shrinks. When I was younger, I spent a lot of time gathering stuff that could hand down to my kids. I wanted them to have what I didn't. Now I learn my stuff isn't what they want and I need to start cleaning house, and realize that all my kids want for me is love.

It is like the parable of a rich farmer whose response was to build more barns so he could keep it all. Jesus' commentary was real life is more than food and clothing. As I look at what was so important for me to collect over the years, I realize how my

dependencies led to unanticipated burdens. I have stuff that no one else wants and yet I am hesitant to sell, give, or throw away. How do things become so important that they cling to us as they do?

God has worked miracles in our lives so we need not live like baby birds always begging God for more, but instead might celebrate with joy the fullness God has given. Death is conquered, forgiveness is a gift, and heavenly peace is our home. Does that not color everything, and anything else we do or face?

This is the difference between praying for needs and praying to give thanks! Understand it this way; being faithful is simply letting faith fill us, being responsible and loving, and knowing God will work out the details. -tws