A Half Full or Half Empty Faith

So, ok, I tend to be a pessimist, while my dear wife, Betsy, is an optimist. I see the cup half empty and she sees the cup half full. There are two stories that define the way Betsy and I see life differently:

An optimist sees the best in the world, while a pessimist sees only the worst. An optimist finds the positive in the negative, and a pessimist can only find the negative in the positive. For example, an avid duck hunter was in the market for a new bird dog. His search ended when he found a dog that could actually walk on water to retrieve a duck. Shocked by his find, he was sure none of his friends would ever believe him. He decided to try to break the news to a friend of his, a pessimist by nature, and invited him to hunt with him and his new dog. As they waited by the shore, a flock of ducks flew by. They fired, and a duck fell. The dog responded and jumped into the water. The dog, however, did not sink but instead walked across the water to retrieve the bird, never getting more than his paws wet. This continued all day long; each time a duck fell, the dog walked across the surface of the water to retrieve the bird. The pessimist watched carefully, saw everything, but did not say a single word. On the drive home the hunter asked his friend, "Did you notice anything unusual about my new dog?" "I sure did," responded the pessimist. "Your dog can't swim!"

The other story really defines our different perspectives:

"The story concerns twin boys of five or six. Worried that the boys had developed extreme personalities – one was a total pessimist, the other a total optimist – their parents took them to a psychiatrist."

"First the psychiatrist treated the pessimist. Trying to brighten his outlook, the psychiatrist took him to a room piled to the ceiling with brand-new toys. But instead of yelping with delight, the little boy burst into tears. 'What's the matter?' the psychiatrist asked, baffled. 'Don't you want to play with any of the toys?' 'Yes,' the little boy bawled, 'but if I did I'd only break them.'"

"Next the psychiatrist treated the optimist. Trying to dampen his outlook, the psychiatrist took him to a room piled to the ceiling with horse manure. But instead of
wrinkling his nose in disgust, the optimist emitted just the yelp of delight the psychiatrist had been hoping to hear from his brother, the pessimist. Then he clambered to the top of the pile, dropped to his knees, and began gleefully digging out scoop after scoop with his bare hands. ‘What do you think you’re doing?’ the psychiatrist asked, just as baffled by the optimist as he had been by the pessimist. ‘With all this manure,’ the little boy replied, beaming, ‘there must be a pony in here somewhere!’”

(Source: http://www.jokebuddha.com/Optimist#ixzz3gXtV1RdK)

In Jesus’ story today, you might say that Phillip represents the half empty kind of faith while Andrew exhibits a half full kind of faith.

Andrew might say something like, “Wow, Jesus, look at all these people who have come to hear you today. Why, there are more than 5,000 of them.” On the other hand, when the numbers were tallied by Jesus, Phillip responds to Jesus’ question of how to feed all those people, “Why, Lord, it would take six months worth of wages to feed this crowd; and I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we’ve been drawing unemployment ever since we left our fishing nets and followed you. There is no way we can feed this many people.”

For Phillip, who possessed a half empty faith, the task before him was impossible. I remember the scene in “Alice and Wonderland” when Alice told the Queen that “One can’t believe impossible things.” The Queen responded, “Why I daresay you haven’t had much practice…When I was young, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

In our story today, it is time for lunch and Phillip sees nothing but impossibilities. On the other hand, Andrew goes looking for a pony and comes up with five loaves and two fish, which just happens to be a little boy’s lunch.

Scholars ponder the truth of this story as Jesus blesses the half full cup and, suddenly, the cup is running over with 12 baskets of leftovers. Did Jesus do the pull-the-rabbit-out-of-the-hat routine and somehow make five loaves and two fish multiply like popcorn exploding? Or did
the miracle really involve Jesus multiplying the small hearts of the people in front of him who would have probably brought their lunches with them. I mean, there was not a drive-thru to grab a bite! These people may have been poor, but they were not stupid. The bread mentioned in the story was the bread of the poor. They did not have much, but they would have brought with them what they had.

Could it be that when the people saw Jesus take what a small boy offered him and bless it, not knowing how much food was out there in the crowd, that their hearts opened and out came the lunch pails? Suddenly, even in the midst of scarcity, when all were willing to share, there was more than enough to go around.

I smile as I hear this story, for I remember the day I visited the traditional place where Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes. Our group arrived at the Tabgha, which is beside the Sea of Galilee. A mist was rising off the sea that morning and we were the only group there.

I told my folks to take off their shoes and let their feet hang off the shore. I then asked them to rub their toes over the small stones that were visible below their feet.

I then said, “You know, so many of the places we will visit are the traditional places where some think Jesus may have done certain things. This is one of those places. We are not sure if this is the exact place he did the loaves and fishes thing, but I will tell you this: these stones below your feet were here when he was here. He may have picked one of them up and sent it sailing across this water when he was a young child because he loved to come to this sea. This was his special place. He probably put his feet in the water just like you are doing now. The rocks could tell the story. I will shut up now and let you ponder where you are.”

It was a special day. We were running late, however, so when we got off the boat that took us to the other side of the Sea, we were all hungry. The guide took us to what looked a bit like a rustic fish camp and informed us that we were now going to be served loaves and fishes. The fish, he said, would be the exact kind of fish that the people ate in Jesus’ day.

When the food arrived, the fish and loaf were on an old metal plate. The loaf was hard and the fish…well, it was a whole fish—with head, scales, and all. It had been baked whole and served to us. Most of the women in the group sort of gagged a bit. I started poking into the fish and picking out pieces. It wasn’t that bad.
The women at my table noticed what I was doing and suddenly beside me were about ten fish and a number of pieces of bread… so I had my multiplication story! I was half empty when I got there, but I was more than half full when I left.

In John’s gospel, this is not just a miracle or magic trick. John does not put stories in the forms of miracles. For John, this is a sign—it points to something beyond itself.

I told you one time that a sign is not about the sign itself. You don’t go by a stop sign and ponder the shape and size and color of the sign. No, you stop because the sign is bigger than the metal and lettering. The sign signals something for all. The sign is about stopping.

Jesus does this sign to point to something. As we stop today, what will we see? If you listen to the story closely, you will notice that it says the reason the crowd was so large that day was because they “saw the signs” that Jesus was doing. So were they coming that day to see a kind of faith healing magic show?

What they got was Jesus, who probably somehow transformed their small, individualized hearts into a community of sharing. The actual words used indicate that the crowd was somehow changed into a Eucharistic community. Jesus blesses the bread and distributes it to the people. If you do not think that Jesus can still multiply the loaves, just think how many loaves have been broken and blessed at communion tables since that day.

We are the community of the broken and blessed. The question for the day is: Do we bring a half empty faith or a half full faith to Jesus? Do we bring an attitude of scarcity or are we willing to offer what we have—even if we think it might be too small or not make that much difference. All the little boy had was lunch, but it became a sign that scarcity can be turned into abundance in the hands of Jesus.

We will have the opportunity to ask this question very soon. We will be doing a capital campaign to expand our facilities. Many of you voted to do this and indicated that you would find “second mile” money to support this. Others of you said that, although you thought the expansion was a good idea, that you could not give any more money than you were already giving.
So, as your Senior Pastor, I have a challenge for you. Take that half full perspective and take another look. We will need you to do that. If the little boy had kept what he had for himself, we would not have this story. I will need you to risk what you have and realize that giving it to Jesus and his church is what makes the multiplication happen.

In a few weeks, we will be preaching and studying on the subject of fear. For now, let me say that if we step forward with fear, we will not have enough to support this effort. But, if we step out in faith—which, by the way, is the theme that came to me for this campaign—we will have more than enough. The theme will be: “Stepping Out in Faith: Celebrating the Past/Investing in the Future.” The scripture that literally came to me is from I Corinthians 2:5: “So that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.”

If that little boy had listened to only his human wisdom and not responded to Jesus’ request, the story would have had a different ending.

But beyond the specific challenge that we face in the next few months, what else does this Jesus sign point to? In light of all the negative headlines of late, will we face the future with a half empty faith that leaves room for a good deal of fear, or will we have a half full faith perspective that sees faith first and leaves not as much room for fear?

It was Goi Nasu who once said, “An entire sea of water can’t sink a ship unless it gets inside the ship. Similarly, the negativity of the world can’t put you down unless you allow it to get inside you.”

Are we going to be a Phillip and say to Jesus, “There’s just not enough,” or are we going to be an Andrew and say to Jesus, “Well, here is what we have. With you, we will step forward in faith and see what happens.”

I remember a day long ago that I told Jesus I simply did not have enough. I was a struggling young pastor. I was seeing my life and ministry as half full. Quite frankly, I was scared. I did not have enough faith. I had too many questions. Ministers were not supposed to have as much doubt in them as I felt.

Then one day, it happened. I left the home of a family who had experienced a tragedy. One of their teenagers had died in an automobile accident. I do not remember what I said, but as I
left, one of the members of the family followed me out. “Can I say something to you?” he asked.

I nodded and then he said, “I’ve never met a minister like you. You did not give easy answers and you said it was ok to struggle and doubt.” He said some other words, but I did not hear them.

I got in the car and sat there a moment and then I heard it. It was laughter. There was no one in the car with me, but I heard laughter. Then came the still small voice: “Do you think I am stupid?” Well, I thought to myself, if this is God, what am I to say to that?

Then came these words: “I know who you are. I knew who you were when I called you to be minister. I know of your struggles and your doubts. Quit hiding. Be who you are. Stand with my people when there are no answers. Be with them when they can’t feel like I am there. That is why I called you. You have enough faith. Give me what you have and that will be enough.”

So, here I am before you today. I learned that even a half empty faith, when given to Jesus, can be multiplied. What about you? Do you think that what you have is not enough…not enough faith, not enough money, not enough time…not enough? Well, when it comes to Jesus, it can be enough if you are willing to offer it.

So, here we are at a sign. (Hold up a large sign with two directional signs on it; one reads half empty, the other reads half full.) Here is our sign for today. It was Yogi Berra who once said, “When you get to a fork in the road, take it.” Stop and decide which direction you will go.