

I didn't like the preacher I sat by on the plane. I know, I know. You're supposed to like everyone, but this fellow ...The plane was crowded. It was a Sunday afternoon, and I was tired from Sunday-morning services. I was speaking that evening in Atlanta and had planned on taking a nap on the flight.

But this fellow had other ideas. Though he had been assigned another seat, he took the one next to me since it was closer to the front. And when he took it, he took every inch of it—and then some. Knowing I couldn't sleep, I figured I'd review my thoughts for the evening lesson, so I opened my Bible.

"What ya' studying there, buddy?"

I told him, but he never heard.

"The church is lost," he declared. "Hellbound and heartsick."

Turns out he is an evangelist. He speaks in a different church every weekend. "I wake 'em up," he growled. "Christians are asleep. They don't pray. They don't love. They don't care."

With that pronouncement, he took on his preaching tone and cadence and started listing all the woes and weaknesses of the church, "Too lazy-uh, too rich-uh, too spoiled-uh, too fat-uh ..."

The folks around were beginning to listen, and my face was beginning to redden. I shouldn't have let it bug me, but it did. I'm one of those fellows who never knows what to say at the time but then spends the next week thinking, I wish I'd thought to say that.

Well, I've spent the last few days thinking about it, and here is what I wish I'd said to the bad news preacher: God's faithfulness has never depended on the faithfulness of his children. He is faithful even when we aren't. When we lack courage, he doesn't. He has made a history out of using people in spite of people.

Need an example? The feeding of the five thousand.

One would be hard pressed to find much faith on the hill that day.

Philip was cynical.

Andrew was doubtful.

The other disciples were negative.

The preacher I met on the flight would've felt right at home with these guys. Look at them: They aren't praying, they aren't believing, they aren't even seeking a

solution. If they are doing anything, they are telling Christ what to do! "Send the people away" (Mark 6:36). A bit bossy, don't you think?

Looks like the disciples are "hellbound and heartsick." Looks like they are "too lazy-uh, too rich-uh, too spoiled-uh, too fat-uh." Let me be clear. I agree with the preacher that the church is weak. When he bemoans the condition of the saints, I could sing the second verse. When he laments the health of many churches, I don't argue.

But when he proclaims that we are going to hell in a handbasket, I do! I simply think God is greater than our weakness. In fact, I think it is our weakness that reveals how great God is. The feeding of the five thousand is an ideal example. The scene answers the question, What does God do when his children are weak?

When the disciples didn't pray, Jesus prayed. When the disciples didn't see God, Jesus sought God. When the disciples were weak, Jesus was strong. When the disciples had no faith, Jesus had faith. He thanked God.

Look what he does next. "Jesus divided the bread and gave it to his followers, who gave it to the people" (Matt. 14:19).

Rather than punish the disciples, he employs them. There they go, passing out the bread they didn't request, enjoying the answer to the prayer they didn't even pray. If Jesus would have acted according to the faith of his disciples, the multitudes would have gone unfed. But he didn't, and he doesn't. God is true to us even when we forget him.

Why is that important to know? So you won't get cynical. Look around you. Aren't there more mouths than bread? Aren't there more wounds than physicians? Aren't there more who need the truth than those who tell it? Aren't there more churches asleep than churches afire?

So what do we do? Throw up our hands and walk away? Tell the world we can't help them? That's what the disciples wanted to do. Should we just give up on the church? That seemed to be the approach of the preacher I met on the plane.

No, we don't give up. We look up. We trust. We believe. And our optimism is not hollow. Christ has proven worthy. He has shown that he never fails, though there is nothing but failure in us.

I'll probably never see that proclaimer of pessimism again, but maybe you will. If you do, will you give him a message for me?

God is faithful even when his children are not.

That's what makes God, God.

From the book: "A Gentle Thunder"

Copyright (Thomas Nelson, 1995) Max Lucado