



Witnesses to Love

Rachel Hackenberg
Publisher

13,000. That's how many Palestinian children have been killed in Israel's ongoing military campaign against Hamas, as estimated by UNICEF this spring.

1,195,070. That's how many deaths in the United States have been attributed to COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic, according to the CDC as of mid-July.

1 in 5. That's how many children live in food-insecure circumstances in this country, based on the USDA's 2022 numbers.

5,000. That's how many people were hungry on the mountainside where they had come to watch Jesus heal the sick. 5,000. That's how many hungry people Philip felt overwhelmed by when Jesus oh-so-casually asked him, "Where's the nearest market to buy food for these folks?" 5,000. That's how many people Philip was multiplying by the cost of food when he replied, "You don't pay me enough to buy bread for all these people!" (John 6:5-7, loosely translated)

"What can I possibly do?" wondered Philip. The need is so great, the numbers are so massive, the resources are so limited. The anxious guilt of inadequacy is so real. Many of us feel it when we're listening to the latest unprecedented news or reading about all the horrors that are entirely preceded: another hospital bombed in Gaza, another Black woman fatally shot by police, another hurricane devastating a town, another wildfire devouring homes. "What can I possibly do?"

I'm not sure which is more overwhelming these days: the unprecedented or the preceded. I don't know whether the harm caused by unfamiliar events or familiar

events is quantifiably worse. I don't think it makes a difference: harm is harm, devastation is devastation.

And a significant impact of devastation is isolation. Caught up in pain or loss or stress or shame, we retreat into ourselves: reserving our emotional energy and mental bandwidth to deal with ... *everything* ... and sequestering ourselves against further harm. Even when devastation stems from that spiral of inadequacy—when we are not the object of harm but instead a witness to harm—the inward pull can be strong.

When we witness harm and the question panicking our spirit is, “What can I do?” When the only answer we have is, “Nothing I do can possibly be enough!” and inadequacy threatens to drown us. The way out is to witness love in action: Here is a boy with lunch that he's willing to share.

The way out is to show up for someone else. To pass the basket of loaves and fish.

The way out is to be awed by love's abundant breadth and depth. To pick up the leftovers.

No matter how daunting the need. No matter how limited the resources. No matter how many others. When we are overwhelmed by the harms we witness, it is essential that we give witness to love. One person at a time. One action at a time.

And because love's fullness surpasses our understanding, the act of showing up in love can be the beginning of a miracle.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Rachel Hackenberg is the publisher of The Pilgrim Press.

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