

“Where Can We Find Bread?”

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John 6:1-15

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ² A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³ Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵ When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” ⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷ Philip answered him, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” ⁸ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ⁹ “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” ¹⁰ Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹ Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” ¹³ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

¹⁵ When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

A TEST

Today’s story from the gospel of John,
the feeding of the 5,000

is the only miracle story told in all four gospels.

It's an important story.

And in John's gospel it begins with Jesus asking an important question.

The crowds following Jesus are huge,
and they need to be fed.

So, Jesus asks Philip, one of the disciples,

"Where can I go to buy bread for all these people to eat?
They're hungry."

Philip quickly calculates what it would cost.
And it's too much.

He says,

"Even six months wages
won't buy enough for these folks to eat just a little."

Sometimes we are faced with a big problem.
We calculate the cost and ask in despair,

"So what are we going to do?
The needs are too great and the resources are too few?"

Nothing is more frustrating than to clearly see a need, and yet not have the
resources to do anything about it.

Out of frustration we give up and move on.

When it comes to some problems,
Philip has a point.

Some problems are too big for us to handle.
And that makes us feel small and helpless.
Maybe we just need to move on.

Mother Teresa once said something like,
"I know God won't put more on me than I can take.
I just wish he didn't trust me so much!"

Even the most devoted person can feel overwhelmed at times.
And yet, Jesus keeps giving his disciples jobs that are just too big to handle.

Why did Jesus do this?

The Scripture gives us the answer.
Jesus did this to *test* Philip and the other disciples.

A TEACHABLE MOMENT

Jesus didn't need the disciples to come up
with an answer to this seemingly insoluble problem.
Jesus wanted to teach the disciples to trust Him.

We all know this.
We've read the bumper sticker.
"Jesus is the answer". Right?

But, we need to learn that with more than our minds.
We have to learn with our hearts.

Sometimes we have to be tested.
And that time of testing can become a teachable moment where we can
learn to trust God with our whole being,
...with our minds and our hearts.

I wonder.
Are some of the problems that come our way a test?

Can the "hungers" in our life help us appreciate the bread of heaven?

When we don't know where to go or what to do, could that also be an opportunity,
if only we had the courage to wait on the Lord?

William Sloane Coffin in his book, "Credo" wrote,

"The worst thing we can do with a dilemma is to resolve it prematurely...
because we don't have the courage to live with uncertainty."

Uncertainty can be painful.

But, uncertainty can also help us learn to trust in God and not in our own understanding.

Jesus brought this problem of hungry people to his disciples as a test.

The test helped them understand their own weakness in the face of great need.

But, it also helped them learn to trust in God's provision.

GIVE WHAT YOU HAVE TO JESUS

So this miracle is a test that helps us learn to trust in God.

But, this miracle teaches another lesson as well:

Take what you have, no matter how meager,
and bring it to Jesus.

Jesus asked Philip where they might get bread for hungry people.

And Philip responded that they didn't have the resources to feed a crowd like this.

But, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother overheard the conversation and tried a different approach.

Maybe the people had enough food, and they could share.

That sounds like a good idea.

Sharing with others is a godly thing to do.

But, alas the crowd had very little to share.

They didn't have much food.

Andrew had already checked out this possibility.

Only one person in this massive crowd brought a meal.

One little boy had two small fish and five small barley loaves.

I remember one commentator saying that those five "loaves" were more like five small rolls and the fish were like two sardines.

Those fish were sort of like a relish to spread on the bread.

That might have been enough for the little boy.
But, it certainly wasn't enough to feed the crowd.

Andrew is discouraged by this.

He asks,
"With so much hunger, what are five loaves and two small fish?"

When we look at the great problems that face us,
we are tempted to say the same thing.
We don't have the resources.

What are five loaves and two small fish when the need is so great?

Jesus didn't respond to Andrews objection.

Instead, he had the people sit down on the grassy hill. 5,000 people sat down on the green grass that day.

Can you imagine what that looked like?
All those people sitting down on the green grass?

When I think of this sight, all those people on the green grass, I think of the 23rd Psalm.

Most of you know how it goes,

"The Lord is my shepherd.
I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures."

I wonder if John thought about this as he told the story. Probably.

John said Jesus was the Word made flesh.
In other words, Jesus was the human face of God.

And throughout the Old Testament the Lord is portrayed as a shepherd.
The Lord cared for his people like a good shepherd cared for his sheep.

Well, in John's gospel,
Jesus also makes takes this title.
He says, "I am the Good Shepherd".
(John 10:11. 14)

When Jesus says "I am" in the gospel of John he's making a very bold claim.
He' taking a role that's reserved for the Almighty.

He's claiming what John said in the very beginning of his gospel.
He's claiming to be the incarnation of the divine.
"I am the Good Shepherd" says Jesus.

And now this Good Shepherd provides for his sheep on a grassy hill.

Jesus takes what little they have and multiplies it.

He takes the five loaves, gives thanks, and distributes them to the people.
He takes the two fish, gives thanks, and distributes them to the people.

And everyone has as much as they want.
In fact they have more than they want.

This is no meager feast.
This is the Golden Corral buffet!

(It's been a while since I've been there.
But, I can still remember that we always had more than enough.
Everyone left stuffed.)

Well, that's the way it was long ago
when Jesus fed five thousand on a grassy hill.

And as if this isn't a big enough miracle,
the Scripture tells us that they had leftovers!
Twelve baskets full.

Jesus took what wasn't nearly enough,
and makes it more than enough.

Take what you have to Jesus,
and it will be more than enough.

Disciples still need to learn that lesson.
We need to learn that lesson.

A MIRACLE OF REVELATION

So the miracle teaches us to trust in God's provision.
It teaches us to take what we have to the Lord.

And third, this miracle teaches us about the person of Jesus.

Jesus was more than just a prophet or a priest or a king.

He was the Son of God.

Jesus not only said what only God could say.
He did what only God could do.

Who can calm the wind and the waves?
And who can take the stuff of creation and multiply it?

Only the Lord.

The Son of God held in his hands the grain of every field, and the fish in every ocean.

His hands delivered the bread of life,
for this world and the next.

Feeding the 5,000 with only five loaves and two fish
was more than a miracle of compassion.
It was a revelation of Jesus' identity.

Jesus was so much more than anyone expected.
He was God's Son.

There was a depth to this miracle
that went beyond just feeding a large crowd on a particular day.

This miracle was about bread from heaven.
Jesus was the giving people manna in the wilderness.
Jesus was proving that he was the way, the truth and the life.

NOT THAT KIND OF KING

But, the crowd didn't get the message.
They didn't look beyond the miracle to see the greater message.

Instead, they just wanted more bread.

The crowd thought that Jesus was a prophet, a wonderworker, or, if you will, ...a genie who would give them anything they wanted.

And they wanted to make him king
...by force if necessary!

That last phrase always caught my attention.
They wanted to make Jesus king "by force".

Is that even possible?
Can we make Jesus king by force?

In some ways we still try to do this.
We try to force Jesus into a box.
We make him into a Republican or a Democrat or a capitalist or a communist.

We make Jesus say what we want him to say instead of really listening to him.

Jesus is not a genie.
Jesus is a Savior.

I believe in miracles.
But, I also believe that these miracles point
to something more important than my personal gain.

It's not about more bread.
It's not about getting what we want.

It's not about living a charmed life because God is on our side.

It's about the presence of God in our lives.
And that's what we really need.

Jesus was not about to let the crowd define his message and mission.
He was not going to be that kind of king.

(And, by the way, Jesus will not let us force him into being the kind of king that we want either.

If we're suffering a spiritual dry spell, sometimes it's because we've left Jesus and not the other way round.)

The Scripture tells us that Jesus escaped the demands of the crowd by "heading to the hills"...withdrawing to the "mountain by himself".

Later in John's gospel we learn that this crowd that wants to make Jesus king,
follows him through the wilderness and around the lake and shows up for breakfast!

Apparently, supper was not enough.
But, Jesus knew what they really needed.

They didn't need Shoney's breakfast buffet
to go with last night's Golden Corral buffet!

They needed something spiritual.

They needed bread from heaven.
They needed to learn about the kingdom of heaven.

They needed God's grace

NOT THE ANSWER THEY WANTED

But, that was not a satisfactory answer to many.
If there was no free breakfast to go with supper,
then they wouldn't be making Jesus king.

We all need food to eat.
But, food alone is not enough to save us.

And yet sometimes we fall prey to those religious leaders and politicians who offer the proverbial “chicken in every pot”.

They promise us more of what we already have.

And quite often it works.
They get our vote.
We want to make them “king”.

But, in the long run, what they offer does not satisfy.

In fact, eating too much food and collecting too much “stuff” can be a sign that there’s something missing in our life.

It’s a sign that we have a deeper need.

I often use a phrase coined by Frederich Buechner.
He said that all of us have a “hunger”
that “even the blue plate special can’t satisfy.”

What do we really need?

We need the Savior.
We need Jesus.

THE LORD’S SUPPER

When the crowd showed up for breakfast,
Jesus used language that was reminiscent of the Lord’s Supper.

He said,

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven.
Whoever eats of this bread will live forever;
and the bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

This is symbolic of course.

But, some of the disciples didn't take it that way.
They took it literally...and left Jesus. (John 6:66)

I think we should cut the backsliding disciples some slack on this point.

They didn't know what we know about Jesus.

If I had heard that talk back then, maybe I would have left too.

But, we know more.

We know that when we eat the bread and drink the cup in the Lord's Supper, it reminds us of what we really need...

...God forgiveness, God's grace.

In Jesus Christ we have that forgiveness.
We have that grace.

Several years ago the Episcopalians ran an ad in the newspaper.

It showed a picture of a communion cup and the communion bread.
And the caption read,

"What other meal can sustain you for a week?"

That's a great summary of today's message.

We pray "give us this day our daily bread".
But, as we pray that, we also remember that Jesus said that men and women do not live by bread alone but by the Word of God.

Do you remember the context of that verse?

It was the temptation.
Jesus was in the wilderness, and he was famished.

And the devil came to him and said,
"If you are the Son of God,
command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

I think that today's lesson is an example of that temptation returning to Jesus.

If only he would do again what he done before,
if only he would fix breakfast as well as supper,
the crowds would make him king.

But, the crowd needed more than bread.
They needed more than a political leader.

They needed a Savior.
And so do we.

And so Jesus refuses to do it the devil's way.

Instead, he dies on a cross.
And on the cross, he brings the bread of heaven
...forgiveness. "Father, forgive them", he said.

WHAT DOES GOD WANT?

Many people in our age are asking a question that sounds a lot like what the crowds were asking long ago,

"What's in it for me?"

But, that's the wrong question when it comes to following Christ.

The question is not "What do I want?"
The question is "What does God want?"

Or to be more specific,
What problem does God want us to tackle?

What do we need to share as a sign of the kingdom that comes,
...a kingdom in which there will be no more suffering or pain?

Is there a tear that we need to wipe away?
Is there a word of encouragement that we need to offer?

Ironically, we can only find Jesus
when we dare to do something for others in his name.

If we seek him and his blessings too directly,
they will always elude us.
Jesus will slip away into the mountainside as he did long ago.

William Sloane Coffin once said
that he did not understand how you can attract people to the Gospel
by appealing to their essentially selfish needs

...and then end up offering them the unselfish Gospel of Jesus.

One of two things will happen.
People will reject Jesus
or they will change Jesus into the kind of Savior that they want instead of
the kind of Savior he really is.

It's hard to follow Jesus.
In fact, when people really get to know him, many quit following him even
today.

There are always other religions that better meet their needs.

But, there is no other way to find the heart of God
than in the unselfish compassion of the man Jesus.

He truly is the way, the truth and the life.

We feed not only upon bread but upon the bread of life.

In Jesus we find what it means to be truly human.
And in Jesus we find what it means to be truly Divine.

In Jesus we find a meal that will sustain us in the wilderness.
In Jesus we receive manna from heaven.

BRING WHAT YOU HAVE TO JESUS

Today Jesus asks us the same question that he asked Philip long ago.

“What are you going to do with all these hungry people?”

There are some that are physically hungry.
But there are many more that are spiritually hungry...

... hoarding resources and not helping others
because they cannot recognize the empty spot in their own soul.

Both hungers need to be fed.
And the need is overwhelming.

If we look at it realistically, we would be prone to despair.

Like those first disciples we want to say,

“Lord, you want me to do?
I can’t feed everyone.
I’m only one person and my resources are meager”

But, Jesus tells us,
“Just give me what you have,
and it will be enough.”

And it is.

Amen.