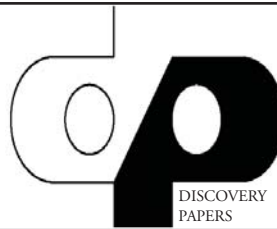


FIVE LOAVES AND TWO FISH

SERIES: PORTRAITS JOHN PAINTED



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John 6:1-15
4th Message
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A funny current TV commercial shows a group of people in trench coats in a large, public lobby. As the clock strikes noon, one guy throws off his coat and does a ridiculous dance, realizing too late that he is alone and that the flash mob dance performance had been rescheduled for 12:30. We have different expectations for the actions of individuals and those of crowds, don't we? No one expects a mob to be mature. In a group, the dancing man would have been an entertainer; by himself he was a fool.

Crowds express passion and are often propelled by emotion. They're good for cheering, but not for discussion. Crowds can be joyful or destructive; can be adoring or hateful. They can overcome fear, or be driven by fear. At their best, a crowd will fill the streets of San Francisco celebrating a World Series championship. At their worst, they will cry for an innocent man to be crucified.

Today we're going to look at the feeding of the 5000, the most important crowd story in the Gospels prior to the events of Holy Week.

In this sermon series on the portraits (stories) in John's gospel, the picture before us is at first a panorama. It will grow more intimate, the focus tightening to the hands of a boy holding bread and fish. We will learn what the gathered crowd learned from Jesus and we will walk beside Phillip and Andrew as they are taught the ways of good shepherding, anticipating the time when they become apostles of the church.

John 6:1-4:

¹Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), ²and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick. ³Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. ⁴The Jewish Passover Feast was near.

These verses describe a multitude that has followed Jesus as he traveled from west to east across the northern end of the sea of Galilee. What we don't know in John's telling, but we do know from Mark, is that the reason that Jesus and the disciples "crossed to the far shore" was to get away from

the crowds and their incessant demands. Jesus intended to take his disciples on a retreat; to pull back from the press of needy and demanding throngs.

But the people who sought Jesus refused to be left behind. They raced on foot around the north end of the lake and confronted the Savior and his disciples when their boat landed. Before we return to John's account, let's notice how Mark fills in the details.

Mark 6:34:

³⁴When Jesus landed he saw a large crowd. He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

³⁵By this time it was late in the day so his disciples came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's very late already. ³⁶Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat."

There are two things to take note of. One is Jesus' response—his compassion for "sheep without a shepherd." In contrast, the disciples' first order of business was to "send the people away." If they are an unwanted nuisance now imagine how much worse things will be when night falls and they are hungry.

We can imagine the disciples speaking to each other, maybe softly, so Jesus didn't hear: "We don't want them here. We don't want Jesus' attention drawn away from our retreat. Their troubles are their own darn fault."

John 6:5-9:

⁵When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

⁷Philip answered him, "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"

⁸Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, "Here is a boy with

five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"

Jesus refused to send the crowd away. Because Philip was from this region he is asked to answer a question that is addressed to all the disciples. The question is a test—Jesus knew what would happen next, but these men needed to discover their characteristic lack of compassion. They will one day become apostles leading the church, will be shepherds for the “sheep without a shepherd.” They had to learn to set aside their own desires for love’s sake. Jesus may assign us to love difficult people and frustrate our plans as well.

In obedience to Jesus the disciples make an effort to find a solution. They acted as we are prone to do, asking first if there is enough money. And the answer is emphatically ‘no.’ Half a year’s wages is impossibly beyond the means at hand and Philip delivered the financial bad news.

Andrew then begins networking among people close at hand. He is measuring the human capital. “If we work together doing our best maybe . . . ?” Yet he came to the same conclusion. We don’t have enough—a small boy with a sack lunch is nothing in face of the need. No application of money or effort can feed 5000 people in a wilderness.

Many commentators will say that these two men failed the test; that their statements show that they didn’t have enough faith. I don’t think that is true. They took on the problem, rather than refusing it. They attempted obedience and discovered inadequacy. And they spoke to Jesus of their shortcomings. “Here is the money we don’t have, the small lunch we do have, what should we do now?”

Though all four gospels recount this event, only John mentions the boy with his barley loaves and small fish—details that highlight insufficiency. Barley bread fed the poor. The boy was too young too matter. And an unforgettable miracle emerged from these insignificant sources.

Before we read further, we should listen again to the compassion of Jesus. We must not ignore human needs that inconvenience us. We live in a world in which sheep need shepherds.

Proud skeptics with wounded hearts need someone who will take the risks of love. Families require help untangling hurtful patterns, as do individuals with debilitating mental illness and physical brokenness. Poverty is destructive in Somalia and Silicon Valley. We cannot refuse to see the needy. We cannot choose to ‘send them away’ if the Lord directs us to serve them. Jesus is the master shepherd. The

disciples must learn to be like him.

Let me say one last thing before we move on to the actual miracle in verse ten. Jesus only fed these people one meal. He did not arrange for an endless supply of bread and fish. The term ‘compassion’ used of Jesus, who saw sheep without a shepherd, means concern for the whole person for the long haul. Provision of an immediate need can create co-dependency if we are not wise enough to minister to the spiritual and emotional needs of individuals in addition to alleviating an immediate physical hardship.

John 6:10-13:

¹⁰Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them. ¹¹Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

¹²When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.” ¹³So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

There are a couple things to observe here. First is that this was a real miracle. Occasionally you may read an explanation offered by those who find miracles objectionable. They will claim that the boy’s generosity inspired all present to share food they had brought along, but kept hidden from their companions.

But John certainly did believe in miracles and this account is written to describe one. You can reject John’s testimony, but you can’t make up something else. We are intended to believe that in Jesus’ hands these loaves and fish were multiplied. The people ate so much they couldn’t eat anymore and piles of food were left over. In the excess we see the grace of God. Just like the wedding at Cana with its over-abundance of wine, there is more food here than the assembly can eat. God’s grace overflows.

Finally, Jesus specifically links this miracle to the miracle of manna during the Exodus. The miracle described in John 6 was not just stunning in the moment, it speaks of a glorious future for the people of God who place their faith in Jesus.

John 6:14-15:

¹⁴After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, “Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.” ¹⁵Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever.

The crowd, driven by appetite, thinking that Jesus would give them all they asked for wanted to make him king by force. They were going to put him on their shoulders, march against their enemies and make him king. Yet Jesus refused. He will be raised up, but not on their shoulders, he will be raised up on a cross. Before he reigns as king he must give his life as a sacrifice. He refused to be king on their terms. He intends something better for them.

John 6:25-27:

²⁵When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, “Rabbi, when did you get here?”

²⁶Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. ²⁷Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.”

The miracle of loaves and fish was intended to create a longing for true food. Later in this discourse he will make plain that he alone is the nourishment that can sustain us, “This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” The crowd wanted immediate gratification. Jesus spoke of his death on our behalf.

Jesus preceded the miracle of feeding 5000 by teaching his disciples to be shepherds. He followed the miracle by instructing the crowd to look beyond food that spoils and to receive “food that endures to eternal life.”

Jesus still intends his disciples to have compassion for ‘sheep without a shepherd.’ And his sacrifice is life for all who believe.

John 6:55-58:

⁵⁵For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me

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