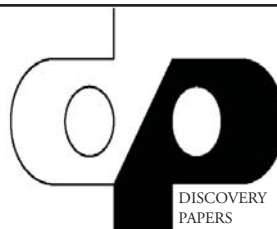




## FIVE LOAVES FOR FIVE THOUSAND



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John 6:1-13  
13th Message  
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We begin this study of John 6 by imagining time travel—inviting Philip, one of Jesus' first disciples, to join us in the Silicon Valley in the 21st century. To make plain the difference between then and now, I suggest that we put Philip in a comfortable chair with snacks readily available, before a big screen TV that is tuned to the Food Channel.

The Food Channel is an easily acquired guilty pleasure. It features celebrity chefs and cooking contests—teams racing to make a gourmet desert out of turnips, perhaps, or competing to build a cake in the shape of the Taj Mahal. I enjoy the competition for food truck supremacy, but Philip would likely recoil in astonishment as he observed food-become-entertainment, meals as a medium for self-expression.

Our time machine works both directions and we'll now make the reverse journey, back to first century Galilee. In Philip's world having enough food for survival was a persistent concern. Jesus taught his followers to pray for bread each day and to be grateful for what they received. As it happens our journey back in time has brought us to a place and time when Jesus will accomplish a miracle with simple food and then open our eyes to spiritual truth.

John 6:1-4:

**After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. <sup>2</sup>And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. <sup>3</sup>Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. <sup>4</sup>Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand.**

We note, as we turn from chapter five to chapter six, that the location of events has changed from Jerusalem to a remote location on the northeast side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is no longer surrounded by angry opponents, rather he is sought by a crowd seeking signs. As we will discover these seekers are fickle, confused, needy, hopeful, motivated both by human selfishness and the possibility of blessing from God.

Verse three mentions Jesus' disciples and we know from

other accounts that the Lord 'went up to the mountain' for a retreat with his disciples and to escape from pressing crowds—though he received them with compassion as 'sheep without a shepherd' (Mark 6:34). Finally, we are told that this event occurred when 'the Passover . . . was at hand.' Our understanding of Jesus' miracle will draw on memories of the Exodus wanderings, the leadership of Moses, and manna from heaven.

John 6:5-7:

**Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" <sup>6</sup>He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. <sup>7</sup>Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little."**

John calls our attention to the action of Jesus 'lifting up his eyes' to take in the crowd. This is the same phrase used in John 4:35—"I tell you, lift your eyes and see that the fields are ripe for harvest"—where Jesus directed his followers to pay attention to people they would otherwise avoid. Perhaps we might stop here for a moment and consider needy people in our world—lifting our eyes to inconvenient, broken, lost men and women. The Lord fed the pressing crowd even though his efforts did not result in changed lives. By the end of chapter six everyone who sought him will have abandoned him. The Savior's compassion, though not based on an anticipated 'successful outcome,' should motivate us to compassion-for-its-own-sake in our setting.

In verse 6 we face another difficulty—the Lord's question to our friend Philip. It seems that Jesus 'tests him' with a meaningless question (Jesus already knew what he would do next) that has no possible right answer. But it's not, of course, the kind of test for which Philip will receive a grade. The test is offered to help Philip understand his own heart, and to discover the depth of his faith in Jesus. Following Jesus requires stepping into circumstances in which we have nothing to contribute. The test in John 6:5 points forward to Jesus' question in 6:67, 'do you want to

go away as well?’ Philip is one of only 12 (11 actually) who pass this test—remaining faithful without having answers to every question.

The question, “Where are we to buy bread?” also points forward. In subsequent teaching Jesus declared that “the bread that came down from Heaven . . . the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (v. 51). He paid the price to feed us ‘true food’ by dying on the cross.

But let’s return to John’s description of an extraordinary miracle on a hillside in Galilee.

John 6:5-9:

**<sup>5</sup>“Where are we to buy bread so that these people may eat?”**

**<sup>7</sup>Philip answered him, “Two hundred denari worth of bread is not enough for each of them to get a little.” <sup>8</sup>One of the disciples, Andrew Simon Peter’s brother said to him, <sup>9</sup>“There is a boy here who has five loaves and two fish. But what are they for so many?”**

I don’t believe that Philip’s calculation in answer to Jesus’ question is inappropriate. A clear measure of our inadequate resources can be an excellent starting place. Philip’s problem was that he didn’t take the next step. He didn’t make a statement of faith or ask for further instructions, as if Jesus were stymied by his announcement of the funding problem.

In a similar circumstance (chapter 2) Mary spoke to Jesus of need that had no obvious solution—insufficient wine at a wedding feast. She, eventually, acted in faith telling the servants “Do whatever he tells you.” Mary assumed that Jesus had resources that were unknown to her. Philip doesn’t make such a statement.

Most of us are like Philip— easily fixated on the problem of not having enough. We establish a working group: “maybe we can re-figure the numbers or adopt a strategy to spend money more effectively.” We attempt to raise funds and put smart people in charge steering the ship, proceeding as if what we can see is all God has to work with.

Consider how healthy churches help families in crisis—offering needed resources, loving companionship, and good counsel. New strategies for communication are taught. Lifestyle changes are advocated. But as important as it is for the believing community to act compassionately,

our best efforts are not all there is. Families in crisis need divine intervention. We must speak and pray and listen so that the powerful presence of the Spirit of God is honored. We must stand with those in need as they trust God to act in ways only he can.

Paul was physically limited by what he called a “thorn in his flesh”—perhaps a problem with his eyesight. He repeatedly asked the Lord for healing and none came. Here is what he concluded: “But Jesus said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Corinthians 12:9). We discover the extraordinary riches of God’s grace only when we recognize our need.

Andrew’s statement suggests a concern different from Philip’s. He seems to be aware that only a miracle will solve the problem at hand. He brings five loaves and two fish to Jesus, adding ‘but what are they among so many?’ A mighty event is possible in theory and is clearly what is required, but Andrew didn’t expect anything extraordinary to happen in his world. Philip’s fixation on human resources and Andrew’s ‘yes, but’ approach to faith are familiar to us aren’t they? Recalling a familiar phrase, ‘our God is too small.’

And finally, there is an unnamed boy who offers his small lunch to Jesus. The other three gospels describe 5,000 being fed, but only John gives us the story of this boy. He was poor. Barley loaves were found in homes that could not afford wheat. His humble generosity is a beautiful counterpoint to the statements of Philip and Andrew. A breathtaking work, a display of Jesus’ power and compassion, flowed from the faith of a small boy who gave what he had without reservation.

John 6:10-13:

**<sup>10</sup>Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number.**

**<sup>11</sup>Jesus then 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. <sup>12</sup>And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, “Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.” <sup>13</sup>So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten.**

A couple of observations: first, the work of seating the

people.

Counting women and children there were probably more than 10,000 hungry, restless seekers on a hillside in the wilderness. Jesus' disciples were hands-on participants organizing a miraculous event that became clear only as it unfolded. Our faith grows when the Lord's power is displayed and this most often occurs when we are actively serving him, rather than sitting on the sidelines.

Secondly, we notice the abundance of leftovers. An immense crowd had eaten till they could not eat any more ('as much as they wanted') and overflowing baskets of food remained to be picked up. The hesitancy of Philip and Andrew at first is drowned by the abundance of divine generosity at the end.

And finally, we should note Jesus with the bread in his hands. "Jesus took the loaves. And when he had given thanks, he distributed them" (vs. 11). And the Greek word 'to give thanks' here is familiar to us: eucharist, a term for the communion meal in which we remember Jesus' sacrifice. John's description of Jesus' care for hungry seekers on a hill by a lake points forward to an infinitely greater act of compassion

On a future occasion when 'the time of the Passover' has returned, the Lamb of God will offer his life to take away the sins of the world. On the night of his betrayal Jesus will take bread and break it and say, "This is my body which is for you."

As the loaves of barley were multiplied in Galilee so the life giving power of Jesus' sacrifice expands as we trust him in worship—receiving the meal he chose for us to eat together.