

JOHN AND THE BOOK OF SIGNS
(5) THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND

John 6:1-15

Jeffrey S. Carlson

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SCRIPTURE

¹After this, Jesus crossed over to the far side of the Sea of Galilee, also known as the Sea of Tiberias. ²A huge crowd kept following him wherever he went, because they saw his miraculous signs as he healed the sick. ³Then Jesus climbed a hill and sat down with his disciples around him. ⁴(It was nearly time for the Jewish Passover celebration.) ⁵Jesus soon saw a huge crowd of people coming to look for him. Turning to Philip, he asked, “Where can we buy bread to feed all these people?” ⁶He was testing Philip, for he already knew what he was going to do.

⁷Philip replied, “Even if we worked for months, we wouldn’t have enough money to feed them!” ⁸Then Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up. ⁹“There’s a young boy here with five barley loaves and two fish. But what good is that with this huge crowd?” ¹⁰“Tell everyone to sit down,” Jesus said. So they all sat down on the grassy slopes. (The men alone numbered 5,000.) ¹¹Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks to God, and distributed them to the people. Afterward he did the same with the fish. And they all ate as much as they wanted. ¹²After everyone was full, Jesus told his disciples, “Now gather the leftovers, so that nothing is wasted.” ¹³So they picked up the pieces and filled twelve baskets with scraps left by the people who had eaten from the five barley loaves.

¹⁴When the people saw him^e do this miraculous sign, they exclaimed, “Surely, he is the Prophet we have been expecting!” ¹⁵When Jesus saw that they were ready to force him to be their king, he slipped away into the hills by himself (John 6:1-15 NLT).

INTRODUCTION

What is your favorite Bible story? A young boy not known for his ambition replied, “I really like the story of the multitude that just loafs and fishes.” Who wouldn’t? A day of loafing and fishing sounds like a great time. But there is no such story in the Bible. Rather, there is an account of how Jesus fed a multitude of people using five small barley loaves and two fish. It is the fourth of seven miraculous signs found in the section of John’s Gospel known as the Book of Signs.

Jesus had withdrawn to the north shore of Galilee or, as it was known under the Roman occupation, the Sea of Tiberias. He took with him his closest disciples but they were soon discovered by some of the many people traveling through the area getting ready for the Passover festival. Many of these people had already heard of Jesus. Others were just curious. Soon a large crowd gathered around Jesus and his disciples.

They were tired. They were hungry. And Jesus had compassion on them. He also took the opportunity to teach some important lessons to his followers. He asked Philip:

“Where can we buy bread to feed all these people?” (6:5).

You see, Philip was a local. He came from a village not far from there. If anyone was familiar with the resources in the area it would have been Philip. Philip had a practical mind and immediately began to size up the situation and concluded that even if they worked for months they would not have enough money to buy enough food. Of course, he might just as well have said years instead of months because the disciples had little more than a few coins between them. So Philip concluded that the deed was impossible.

Then Andrew brought up a young boy with a small lunch consisting of barley loaves and fish. Jesus received the lunch, gave thanks to God and then began to hand out the loaves and then the fish. And he kept handing them out, and handing them out, and handing them out until everyone had more than enough to eat. There was a lot left over and it was collected in large baskets.

The crowd responded by saying:

“Surely, he is the Prophet we have been expecting!”

The reference for this is in Deuteronomy where Moses says:

“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him” ((Deut 18:15).

John tells us that the crowd wanted to compel Jesus become their king. R. L. Fredrikson captures the motivation:

Would not this new Prophet give them permanent physical security, full bellies, and instant healing, and supply all their fleshly needs? So they will make Him their king! What an irony that they believe they can pressure the One who is already King into being a king on their terms.

In time the disciples realized that this miraculous sign was yet more evidence that Jesus was who he claimed to be - the very Son of God. And as the Son of God he possessed power no prophet could possess - the power to redeem human lives.

1. GREAT THINGS HAPPEN WHEN WE BRING PEOPLE TO JESUS

Out of this account there are a number of lessons to be learned. One lesson is this: Great things happen when we bring people to Jesus.

Andrew brought this lad to Jesus. He did a lot of that sort of thing. He may not have been the sanguine leader that his brother Peter was. He may not have been the deep feeler that John was. He may not have had the intellectual prowess of Thomas. But he was very good at bringing people to Jesus. He even brought his own brother to Jesus. Bringing people to Jesus was important then and it is just as important today.

Fifty years ago the church was an institution recognized and often supported by society-at-large. There were many mutually affirmed values and expectations including the expectation to be part of a local church. Consequently, worship attendance and Sunday School enrollment were at record high levels. Today society is often indifferent if not antagonistic toward the institutional church and worship attendance and Sunday School enrollment are at record lows.

The congregations that thrive today are congregations that have recognized this change. They no longer see the church as an institution *of* society but as a mission *to* society. They delight to be God's people bringing people to Jesus.

Our Mission Statement for First Presbyterian Church states that our purpose is: "To Share God's Love and Grace with All People and Celebrate the Truth of Jesus Christ." What better way to share God's love and grace and celebrate the truth than by bringing people to Jesus?

There are many people today who are like this lad in the story. They would be interested in knowing more about Jesus but somebody needs to bring them, somebody needs to invite them. Scripture tells us that all of heaven celebrates when even one person responds to such an invitation (Luke 15:10). Great things happen when we bring people to Jesus.

You do not have to be an evangelist to do this. You do not have to have a prepared speech to do this. You do not have to know the answers to a lot of questions to do this. All you need to do is invite people. Invite them to church. Tell them we are open on Sundays! Invite them to come, welcome them when they do, and trust God to do the rest. Great things will happen when we bring people to Jesus.

2. GREAT THINGS HAPPEN WHEN WE LISTEN TO JESUS

Great things happen when we listen to Jesus.

The disciples of Jesus determined that it would be impossible to provide food for such a large crowd. Indeed, you get the impression they were anxious to leave quickly lest the crowd become unruly. But Jesus had something else in mind. He gave them instructions. I sometimes wonder what would have happened if the disciples had not listened to Jesus. What, if anything, would have transpired? But they did listen. They may not have completely understood but they did listen. And because they listened to Jesus great things happened.

In Jesus we have this marvelous combination of natural wisdom and supernatural power. Jesus was eminently practical. He had the people sit down. Why? Presumably, for their own safety. Think about this. You have a large crowd of hungry people and one source of food and a small amount at that. It could have been a recipe for disaster (pardon the pun). The crowd could have become a mob and rushed for the food, trampling the most vulnerable underfoot - the very young, the very old and the infirmed. But Jesus had them sit down.

We read in the other Gospels that he organized them into groups of fifty. This made the distribution much easier. He was eminently practical.

He also had supernatural power. And he displayed supernatural power here on the north shore of Galilee. Or did he?

Some hold that what really happened was that Jesus took out his lunch and shared it with his disciples who had forgotten to bring any food. The crowd saw what Jesus did and those who had also brought their own lunches were inspired to bring them out from where they had hidden them and share with their neighbors who did not have any food. So the whole thing was a marvelous lesson in being unselfish. But it was not a miracle.

I have several problems with this interpretation:

- The plain reading of the text indicates the miraculous. You have to radically alter and add to the text in order to make it into a story about unselfishness.
- The full weight of Christian history is on the side of believing this was a miracle.
- Apart from the resurrection, this is the only miracle mentioned in all four Gospels. That alone calls attention to its significance.

- Why did they think he was the great Prophet foretold by Moses? Because he brought a lunch or because he performed a great sign?
- There was a great quantity of food. The Greek term here is used to describe a super-abundance. They were “stuffed to the gills” and still had a large amount left over. Could that much food have been kept hidden within their garments?

No, this is an account of the supernatural power of God flowing through Jesus. And this is Good News for us! For Jesus is more than a moral example. He is a life-changing Savior. Jesus did not come to make good people a little bit better. He came to redeem sinners, to transform the lives of those who were hopeless and helpless without him.

We need to pay attention to him in order to discover what he seeks to do in our lives. We need to listen to his Word because if we listen to his Word great things will happen among us.

3. GREAT THINGS HAPPEN WHEN WE GIVE TO JESUS

And great things happen when we give to Jesus.

Andrew brought this lad to Jesus. His lunch consisted of five small barley loaves and two fish. In those days, barley was fed to animals. Only a poor family would make a barley loaf. It was so difficult to chew that they combined it with pickled fish in order to make it palatable. But such as it was he was willing to give it all to Jesus. And look what happened because of it!

I have been here long enough to know that many of you feel inadequate in your service to God. You wonder if your efforts have made any difference whatsoever. It feels like you only have “five small barley loaves and two fish.” I am here to tell you that is enough. Give what you have to Jesus and trust him to do the rest. Give what you have to Jesus and extraordinary things will happen.

CONCLUSION

Great things happen when we bring people to Jesus. Great things happen when we listen to Jesus. Great things happen when we give to Jesus. So what do you say? Let’s make some great things happen!

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, help us to have the courage to be an inviting people, attentive to your Word and generous with the blessings we have received from your hand. Amen.