

John: Five Loaves and Two Fish

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Prayer of Illumination

Since we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from your mouth, O God, help us hunger for this heavenly food, that it may nourish us today in the ways of eternal life; through Jesus Christ, the bread of heaven. Amen.

Background

We find ourselves this morning in the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel according to John. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are the first three gospels, and are collectively known as the Synoptic Gospels. They share many commonalities with the Fourth Gospel, yet John is quite distinct from them.

The first three gospels emphasize the coming kingdom of God, while the fourth gospel emphasizes that Jesus' eternal life can be experienced now. Now is the time for us to dwell, abide, and remain in Christ Jesus, just as the Son does with the Father. So there's little mention of the Kingdom of God in John. Instead, King Jesus is emphasized in the Fourth Gospel more than the Kingdom of God.

There are no parables in John, but there is a considerable amount of symbolism, metaphor, and irony. John loves the number seven—there are seven signs Jesus performs, seven titles for Jesus, and seven I AM statements Jesus utters.

You also find at least seven contrasts throughout the Fourth Gospel:

- light/dark
- above/below
- love/hate
- true/false
- spirit/flesh
- not of this world/of this world
- children of God/children of the devil

John talks a lot about the Holy Spirit, called the “paraclete” in Greek, which means the Advocate or The One Called Alongside to Help. For John, the Spirit is kind of like a Jesus Part 2--making Jesus present and at work throughout the world, rather than being limited to Jesus' geographical location while He was on earth. John towers in his description of both the humanity of Jesus and the divinity of Jesus. Jesus is where heaven and earth intersect.

And so Jesus' humanity is vividly described in the Gospel of John: His weeping, His exhaustion, and His hunger. But Jesus' divinity is also loud and clear in the Gospel of John, especially with His I AM statements—I am the Good Shepherd, I am the way, and the truth, and the life, I am

the Resurrection, I am the gate, and so forth. These all point back to God's self-revelation in the burning bush to Moses, "I AM who I AM."

So let's hear now about one of Jesus' seven signs—the miraculous multiplication of the bread and the fish, which teaches us a deeper truth about Jesus—they are a sign, that He is the Bread of Life.

Scripture: John 6:1-15 (NRSV)

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with His disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near.

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?" He said this to test him, for He himself knew what He was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" 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. 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. When they were satisfied, He told His disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. 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."

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.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – John: Five Loaves and Two Fish

Five Loaves. Two fish. Bread and fish have literal meanings and figurative meanings in Scripture.

First, bread. Bread has been the staple of society for over 6,000 years. Bread was an everyday need in Jesus' time. It represents life, sustenance, nourishment. Bread fills us up. Give us this day, our daily what? Bread. Yet also, God says that man shall not live by what alone? Bread.

Metaphorically, bread is a symbol of something deeper:

God's sustenance and sovereignty,
God's providence and God's protection,
God's gifts and God's grace.

Bread from heaven—remember the manna and also the quail—they were miraculously provided by God in the book of Exodus, under Moses' leadership as the Hebrews waited and wandered in the wilderness for the Promised Land. God provided. And now there's a part two here.

Bread from heaven—miraculously multiplied bread—by Jesus. It is a messianic symbol of God's restoration and God's promise. This bread from above is a sign that someone greater than Moses is here. Jesus is the New Moses who provides Living Bread for the whole world. Bread nourishes community. It creates a social bond. Bread is where we get the word companions, "pan" meaning bread, or Compañeros, those that we eat "bread together" with. That is what we are, that is who we are.

Jesus worked His miracle with not only bread, but with fish. Fish in the Hebrew Scriptures represent the Jewish people themselves. The rabbis had a saying—the people who have a thirst for the Torah will be as little fishes. Here in our passage these fish represent Jesus' multiplying His followers. Jesus tells His disciples that He will make them fishers of men and women.

The fish is a creature of the water. We, the people of God, come from the water—but we are spiritually reborn in our baptismal waters. Fish cannot live without water. A follower without the Torah is like a fish out of water. We are spiritually hydrated by our baptismal waters. The "ichthus", the Greek word for fish, was an ancient secret symbol that identified one as a Christian.

When the five-thousand finished eating, Jesus' disciples gathered up 12 remaining baskets of bread—12 is also symbolic for John. In all Jewish festivals, leftovers were gathered and given to the servants—this was a time of Passover, this was during a Jewish festival. Nothing was wasted. Jesus was doing the same here. Twelve is also the number of loaves put on the table for the Bread of Presence in the temple. The twelve tribes of Israel. The twelve Disciples making up the New Israel. Jesus cares about both literal food and spiritual food, spiritually nourishing the world. Jesus fed the hungry with bread.

This miracle of feeding the 5000 is the only miracle that's found in all four of the gospels. In fact, Matthew and Mark mention this miracle two times in their books. This is the most defining and symbolically rich of all the miracles that Jesus performed. To understand His character, we have to

understand this miracle. I dare say, the times we are most Christlike are when we're in the Witherspoon kitchen spreading margarine on hamburger buns and slapping on the bologna and cheese to make sandwiches for hungry people, for Casa Maria. Or when we're bringing food into the sanctuary, or food for the food bank, or volunteering at the Haven Totes food bank.

We also need to remember Jesus feeds us in another way. We can't forget—both the literal feeding that He gives and the spiritual feeding—the living bread. We must never forget this. Through the Spirit of God—Jesus feeds our souls with the knowledge and relationship in the love of God, sustaining our faith, nourishing our faith, giving us salvation and abundant life, not only for the future, but in this moment in which we find ourselves. Like Christ, with Christ in us, we feed the world—literally and spiritually.

Even though these crowds were an interruption and an inconvenience to Jesus—Jesus was trying to get away from them, Jesus was tired—yet He still had compassion on them. This inspires us to slow down ourselves, to see the sacredness of our schedule interruptions. Like Jesus, we need to “look up,” and not look down on others.

“You give them something to eat.” “You give them something to eat” says Jesus.

Jesus doesn't want to do it alone. He could. But He doesn't. Jesus works in us and through us, His disciples. Jesus took the crowds seriously. Jesus took the little boy seriously. He took the child's five loaves and two fish seriously. The good news is that Jesus takes us, and what we bring, seriously, even if it's not that much. Barley bread was the cheapest of bread—barley was thought to be better for feeding the animals than for feeding humans. And the fish were likely the size of a sardine—and it was either pickled or dried. Yet Jesus says these wonderful 5 words:

“BRING THEM HERE TO ME”

Jesus is still speaking today. He is still performing wonders and signs and miracles, and saying today, “bring me what you have.”

- When you don't have squat—Jesus says bring your squat to me.
- When you feel unimportant, when you feel used up, when you feel forgotten—Jesus sees you and He invites you to bring yourself to him—and to see the transformation that takes place.
- When your marriage is falling apart—Jesus says “bring it to me”—bring the tatters of your relationship to me—let me restore it.
- When the money is tight, but you want to give to God—Jesus says, “bring it to Me, bring Me your meager resources—and I will multiply it.
- When your faith is small—just the size of a little mustard seed—you give it to Jesus and He will move mountains with it.

Little is much in the hands of Jesus. However little or insignificant it is—Christ can multiply it and mightily use you and your gifts in His service.

This is good news: God takes our limited resources and uses them for unlimited possibilities. With Jesus, what you have and what you are is perfectly imperfect.

Like the disciple Philip, we've got to stop fixating on our lack, our limitations, and our littleness and instead look up to Jesus and see the possibility, and see the potential, and see His miracle-working power that He provides. Give God your ordinary and watch him transform it into the extraordinary.

We read that Jesus gave thanks as He broke the bread. The Greek word is "eucharisteo." That's where we get the word eucharist—holy communion, giving thanks. Jesus probably prayed this ancient Jewish prayer over the fish: Blessed are you, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who brings forth bread from bread. And that's exactly what happened. Bread from bread from bread from bread from bread was brought forth. A miracle. All ate, all 5,000, and they were satisfied.

With Jesus there's more than enough to go around. We don't have to worry about the spiritual cupboards being bare with Jesus. They just keep filling up. There's so much more room at the Lord's table. Christ can feed so many more than we think. With Jesus, the more the merrier.

The Messiah's mathematics are not zero-based: which means the more you give the less you have. Rather, the Messiah's math is eternity-based: The more you give, the more there is to go around. The more you give away, the more you get.

In Jesus' geometry, you can't possess what you don't give away. This was Jesus' moment. He was poised to make it to the big time. They had His own leather sandal line in the works. A book deal was being discussed. Maybe even a movie.

What did Jesus do?

He saved the leftovers for those who weren't even able to make it. Jesus was not only thinking about the multitudes, He was thinking about those who were not even there, those who are not yet here. Then, He slipped away from the crowds. Yes, Jesus was king. But not king of this world, not in their way and in their time.

Immanuel, we are Christians—"little christs." We have a calling and a responsibility to continue Christ's ministry in the world. The spirit of Christ is in us and upon us. Let's let Christ work through us and in us. Christ has blessed us, not just to be blessed, but so we can be a blessing. Christ, the Bread of Life, feeds us. Let's also take this blessed Bread of Heaven to a hungry world, in Jesus' name.

Amen.

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