

Sermon Series Four: Believe and Live
(The Gospel of John: Signs of the Messiah - 1:1-12:50)

John 6:1-15

Feeding the Thousands

Ours is one of the few cultures that open an almost full refrigerator saying, “There is nothing to eat.” In sharp contrast ancient cultures had hunger as their constant companion and nemesis. There were no grocery stores to go to and harvests were always uncertain. Many lived only two or three days away from starvation. To have enough food was considered a great blessing. Indeed, food had become a symbol of prosperity. Because many in that day considered food and physical needs as their number one priority, they were all too ready to accept Jesus as a political Christ, who would be a purveyor of cheap food and establish an economic utopia with food in abundance - food easy to come by. *But once again, Jesus is about to use a physical need and pleasure to introduce a spiritual need and pleasure.* The pleasures of light making all nature’s beauty visible should draw us to Christ who is the Light of the World. The pleasures of fresh drinking water should remind us of Christ who is the Living Water. And the pleasures of warm hot bread should remind us of Christ who is the Bread of Life.

This is the only miracle that is found in all four Gospels. We find that Jesus and his disciples have come to a sparsely populated area on the northeastern side of the Sea of Galilee. 1) They have come there because they want to be alone. They have just received very difficult news that John the Baptist has been beheaded and they are grief stricken. And they are completely exhausted from the multitudes that were constantly demanding a piece of their time and energy. John 6:2-3 says, “*And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples.*” The imperfect tense of the Greek tells us that these people “*kept following*” Jesus and “*continually saw or observed*” the signs that he “*habitually performed or was doing.*” Certainly Jesus and the disciples are experiencing ministry fatigue. 2) John 6:4 adds another important detail. It was the time of the Passover. Because of this, the people would be thinking in terms of lambs, flesh, blood, and unleavened bread. And this would set the stage for Christ movement from the miracle of feeding the 5000 to his discourse on being the Bread of Life. Jesus is doing much more than providing a meal of fish and bread. Jesus is saying something or doing something in the natural realm to point to something in the spiritual realm. But as we look at this miracle I would like you to understand two important realities:

I. Our Need

1. Many selfishly support Jesus only as long as he gives them what they want. Verse two says that “*a large crowd was following him, because they saw the*

signs that he was doing on the sick.” Verses 14 and 15 add *“When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, this is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!”* Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, *Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”* Verse 66 concludes with *“After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.”* Passover was an intensely nationalistic celebration in Israel which explains the mood and the zealous way in which many of these Jews sought to draft Jesus as their political deliverer (verse 15). But what these verses reveal is: **1)** that they were following him for the benefits of his miraculous power while rejecting his message and what he came to do - to seek and to save those who were lost. **2)** Their enthusiasm was for what they wanted him to be and not for whom he actually was. They wanted Messiah now on their terms and representing their view of the coming Prophet. Often people today have a great enthusiasm for Jesus, but the Jesus they are excited about is not the real biblical Jesus. It may be a morally exemplary Jesus, or a social Jesus, or a capitalist Jesus, an anti-Semitic Jesus, or a revolutionary liberationist Jesus, even a counter-cultural cool Jesus. But if your enthusiasm for Jesus is for a Jesus that doesn't exist, your enthusiasm is no honor to the real Jesus and he will “leave you and go into the mountain.” Further when Jesus does not prove to be what we want him to be, many walk away! William Barclay writes *“When Christ comes to us with some stern demand for sacrifice, with some challenge to effort, with the offer of some cross, then we will have nothing to do with him. When we examine our hearts, it may be that we will find that we too love Jesus for what we can get out of him, and when he comes to us with his great challenges and demands we too grow lukewarm, and even resentful and hostile to this disturbing and demanding Christ.”*

2. Many times we offer what seem to be good solutions while missing the One who is the solution to our problems. Verses 5-9 say, *“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?’ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. Philip answered him, ‘two hundred denarii 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 for so many?’”* Notice that this sign illustrates three solutions to problems that people typically try. First, Philip suggested that **money** was the solution to the problem (v. 7). Second, Andrew looked to **people** for the solution (v. 9). A third solution appears in the other Gospel accounts of the miracle (Matt. 14:15; Mark 6:36; Luke 9:12): **get rid of the problem**. The disciples told Jesus to send the people away, to let them fend for themselves (cf. Matt. 15:23). But as we will see, **Jesus proved to be the true solution (v. 11).**

3. Many instead of being compassionate are often dispassionate about the needs of others. Note again that the disciples wanted him to send the people away. Often in the busyness of our lives we don't have time for people and their problems. Instead of love and compassion we feel contempt, frustration, annoyance, anger, resentment, and bitterness - but not compassion.

4. Many do not realize that our greatest need is not our physical need but our spiritual need. I believe that it was by design that Jesus went to a place where there were no towns and therefore no shops in which to buy food. There were no human resources picturing the fact that mankind cannot find within himself any ability to meet his greatest need - the solution to the human dilemma. We are completely impotent when it comes to finding God, pleasing God, or experiencing the joy of a life lived in intimacy with God and freedom from the guilt and slavery of our sin. We are broken. Indeed we live in a world where we find examples everywhere of the eventual *failure of natural resources* such as fresh water, soil, natural gas, oil, etc. We often agonize under the failure of our *emotional resources* as daily we are confronted with people struggling with depression, despair, anxiety, nervous breakdowns, uncontrolled tempers, and emotional abuses. We shudder under the burden of corruption in government, a world plagued by wars, rioting, economic woes, and ever-increasing racial tensions. We are broken!

II. His Supply

1. Every partial satisfaction in this life points to the one who is the complete satisfaction. Every honorable pleasure that we have in this created world is designed by God to give us a faint taste of heaven and make us hunger for Christ and the next world. Our physical food and mountain streams are nothing in comparison to the food and drink that we will experience in the new heaven and new earth. Our "BFFs" are nothing in comparison to the friendships and intimacy that we will experience with Christ and the saints of all the ages forever. That wonder we experience when we look at the mountains, the wild animals, the beauty of the sunrise, the vastness of the universe is nothing in comparison to the glory of the new heavens and new earth. And all this Jesus is preparing for us and will one day bring to us! He will fully satisfy!

2. Jesus is the fully satisfying answer to every one of your problems.
"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?' He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do... 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. Jesus then took the loaves, and when he'd given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "gather up

the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.” So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the barley loaves left by those who had eaten.”(6:5-6, 10-13) Notice then:

1) Jesus fully satisfies your need to be loved. Mark’s account says that “*He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things* (Mark 6:34). Luke’s account says that he “*cured those who had need of healing*” (Luke 6:11). He fully satisfied their medical needs by the taking away of those diseases that have plagued them. Then he meets their physical needs by giving them more than enough to eat. But his compassion does not end there, for his love drives him to give them the answer to their spiritual need. They are sheep led by false shepherds and are therefore sheep in need of the true Shepherd. Christ loves you on every level and will now and in the future meet all of your needs on every level: medically, physically, economically, relationally, and spiritually. There is no love like his love!

2) Jesus fully satisfies your need to be used. Jesus could’ve easily bypassed using his disciples. He could’ve easily solved the problem without using this little boy’s lunch - the lunch of a pauper at that. Jesus could have simply spoken the word and there would have been food for all to enjoy. But instead he involves his disciples and this young boy in the work of the kingdom. You might feel insignificant and your part might seem very small such as Andrew’s bringing of the child with his lunch to Jesus. But, when you come to the place that you recognize your own complete inadequacy, when the situation seems overwhelming and impossible to you, just do your part as God has commanded and equipped you. Jesus gives the disciples the chance to simply obey and watch his amazing display of power in and through them. Jesus gives this young boy the opportunity to see that what for a child would be great sacrifice, would absolutely be worth it in the end. God wants to use you! God loves to take your inability and demonstrate the matchless wonder of his ability. God wants to fill your life with priceless memories just like he did that child on that day.

3) Jesus fully satisfies your need to grow. It is important for us to see that Jesus was not really asking Philip to solve the problem, for Jesus had already decided what to do. It was a test in Phillip’s discipleship training. Even eight months of wages (200 denarii) could not begin to pay for the food that was needed. There was a crowd of 15 to 20,000 out there! But what Jesus wants Philip to learn is that He is all-sufficient for every need. He is the God of the impossible. Further, this crowd’s need went well beyond the obvious need for physical food. Lack of physical food might endanger their bodies, but lack of spiritual food was endangering their souls!

Conclusion

The point of this miracle is that Jesus ultimately has not come to earth simply to give you bread, but to be your bread! He is all the nourishment that you will ever need. When you need food, he is the provider of your bread. When you need strength for the tasks and burdens of your day, he is your bread. When you need power and wisdom to break the hold of sin on your life, he is your bread. And he is the bread that satisfies your deepest spiritual longings - the bread that can quench the insatiable hunger of your soul. Come, take and eat!