

**Feeding the Five Thousand**  
**John 6:1 – 14**  
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church  
March 26, 2017

## **Introduction – The place of ‘signs’ in John’s Gospel**

**6** 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.

It is noteworthy that, except for the resurrection itself, this story is the only miracle story reported by all four gospels. **Matthew, Mark, Luke** and **John** each thought the retelling of it to be important enough for it to be included in their telling of the story of Jesus the Christ. Each gospel writer tells the story of Jesus. But each author tells it with a different audience in mind. This miracle made quite an impression.

Jesus performed many miracles or ‘*signs*’ – as John calls them – during the time of his ministry. Obviously, not all of these signs and miracles performed by Jesus are reported to us in the gospels. Indeed, John tells us explicitly, in v. 2, that Jesus did more miracles than he, John, is reporting. One thing that is clear from John’s gospel is that the specific miracles he has chosen to tell are included in the gospel because they also symbolize and teach important spiritual realities. John tells us of them not just because they were miraculous, but also because behind each miracle stands a specific and important spiritual reality. For this reason, John’s gospel is both the most literary and most universal of the four gospels.

One of John’s literary techniques is his use of biblical numerology. In the gospel, and in the **Book of Revelation**, also authored by John, we find the repetitive use of the number seven. In Revelation, there are *seven* letters, to *seven* churches. Jesus walks among the seven lamp stands and before God’s throne is his seven-fold spirit. There are *seven* seals upon the scroll of history. *Seven* trumpets of warning are sounded and *seven* bowls of wrath are poured out. And, in his gospel, it is John who reports Jesus’ seven ‘**I am**’ statements, describing Christ’s person and work. John also tells of seven specific and illustrative miracles performed by Jesus. At the end of the gospel, he tells us that these seven miracles were included in the story he has told for a specific purpose: *that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.* (20:31).

The message is that each is a sign pointing beyond itself to something else. Each of these seven miracles has a specific purpose in John’s gospel. The factual events and details are important, for these events took place in time and space, but their importance is not limited to the lives of the particular people who were touched by the impact of the miracle. Their meaning and importance is

greater. John uses each to symbolize a spiritual reality. Each miracle expresses some aspect of the spiritual work and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ in the lives of his people.

For example, the first sign reported by John is the miracle of the Lord changing the water into wine. On one hand, we might note that Jesus liked a good party and that by this miracle he saved the wedding feast from disaster. But much more is going on as well. It is very important to note that the water that is miraculously changed to wine is taken from large ceremonial jars holding water that was used in Jewish rites of purification. In this way, the first sign that John gives us as to the meaning and significance of the person of Jesus is that he will take the realities of Judaism and fulfill them. The water of Judaism becomes the wine of the gospel message by the power of Christ. The Jewish temple, ceremonies, laws, and rituals point to Jesus, the Messiah, and are fulfilled by him. Another example is the last sign: the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, rejoiced at his miraculous return to the land of the living. But the meaning of the story goes beyond them alone. This sign tells us that Jesus Christ has authority over death. John includes this miracle in his telling of the gospel story because it is a symbol of what Jesus does in raising us to new life.

As we study the gospel of John it is important to ask, "What is the spiritual reality being pointed to when we read John's report of a particular miracle?" Each is included for a specific purpose. Each communicates a clear message. Our job as readers is to ask '*What does this sign mean?*'

The feeding of the multitude is the fourth sign in John's gospel. I believe John intends to communicate three key ideas in the telling of this sign.

### **Jesus fulfills what was foreshadowed in the Old Testament**

<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.

As John tells us of this miracle, he makes several deliberate references to the story of the ancient Israelites in general and the ministry of the prophet Moses in particular. John clearly wishes for us to see a parallel between the two stories. Jesus is greater than Moses. Jesus' advent fulfills the story of Moses.

First, John tells us explicitly that the celebration of the Jewish **Passover** was near. A key element of **Passover** is the **Passover** bread, the *matzo*. In this sign Jesus will provide bread *miraculously*. After the miracle, the rest of chapter six of John's gospel is an extended exploration of the meaning of the *bread of life* that Christ provides.

We are also told that Jesus *went up on a mountainside*. This too is suggestive of the ministry of Moses. He went up onto **Mt. Sinai** to receive God's

law and instruction. Another parallel is this: during the years of wandering in the wilderness, the people of Israel were sustained miraculously by the mysterious manna that appeared each morning. They would gather this food and it became their daily bread as they wandered the trackless wastes of the desert. Moses gave them manna in the wilderness. Jesus gives them bread on the mountainside.

I think the *most* significant Old Testament parallel to this passage is found in Numbers 11. At this point the people of Israel have been wandering in the wilderness for some time. They are tired. They are tired of eating manna day after day. They are irritable. They have a craving for meat to eat. And, the complainers have taken over. Moses, like Phillip in the gospel story before us, is overwhelmed by it all. Moses cries out to God. (Numbers 11:11 – 15).

<sup>11</sup> Moses said to the LORD, “Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? <sup>12</sup> Did I conceive all this people? Did I give them birth, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a nursing child,’ to the land that you swore to give their fathers? <sup>13</sup> Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me and say, ‘Give us meat, that we may eat.’ <sup>14</sup> I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. <sup>15</sup> If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness.”

Jesus asks the same question of Phillip. “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” Phillip does the mental arithmetic concluding that it would take 200 denari. A denari was a day’s wage. It would take eight months salary to feed all these people. The matter was hopeless, from a human perspective.

The point, of course, is a further contrast between Moses and Jesus Christ. Moses could not carry the people by himself. Moses despaired of what was expected of him. The burden was too great, too heavy. But Christ could carry it. He would carry it, for Moses was the precursor, the foreshadow pointing to Jesus, the Messiah.

This is the first meaning of the feeding of five thousand: Jesus is the fulfillment of what was promised and foreshadowed in the Old Testament. He is greater than Moses. Whereas, in Numbers 11, we saw Moses come to the limit of his spiritual resources in leading and feeding the people of Israel. In Jesus Christ we meet one who meets the needs of those who come to him.

### **Jesus meets the needs of those who come to him.**

<sup>5</sup> 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.” <sup>8</sup> One of his

disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him,<sup>9</sup> "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?"<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.

Moses was flabbergasted by the demands of the ancient Israelites. He wants to give up. "Kill me at once," he declares. Though not as despairing, Philip too is overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem before them. A large crowd of people have followed Jesus. They are far from home. However, unlike the ancient Israelites, the crowd does not ask for food. Jesus takes the initiative. He expresses care and concern for the crowd before they feel or express it themselves. And, in doing so, the Lord Jesus is testing Philip. He asks of him, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" This is the same question Moses asked of God in the wilderness. We are about to see how Jesus is greater than Moses.

Philip's experience at that moment is the same as any of us face day by day when we find ourselves confronting difficult and challenging circumstances that seem beyond our ability and resources. The test is this: do we look to our own resourcefulness, or to Christ's. Jesus is testing Philip. We are told that the Lord had already determined what he intended to do. He asks the question in order to gauge the level of Philip's faith.

There are no accidents in life. The challenges we face are God's testing, sent to prove our faith. A bill comes and we think 'How will I pay it?' We go in for tests and the doctor's report is unnerving. Our car breaks down on the roadway. Suddenly the demands on our time seem impossible to meet. A co-worker betrays our confidence. A parent has grown old and difficult decisions must be made. The demands of life seem too great, too burdensome, and too overwhelming.

We must learn from Philip. In response to Jesus' question Philip can only comprehend the scope of his own limited resources: '*eight months wages would not be enough*' he says. He would have done better to have followed the example of the prophet Ezekiel. Before the valley of the dry bones God asks Ezekiel if it is possible for these bones to live. Sensing a trick question, Ezekiel replies, '*O Lord, you know.*' Ezekiel knows, it is not what he, Ezekiel, can do that matters, but what God will do. The sad fact is that unbelief is infectious. Andrew mentions that there is a boy nearby who has a few fish and a loaf of bread, but then pessimistically adds "*but how far will they go among so many?*" Philip has set the tone: Andrew adds the harmony. Thankfully, God's blessings in our lives are given according to his riches, not our faith. Philip and Andrew's unbelief does not thwart Jesus.

This miracle is different from many, if not most, of what we tend to think of when we envision the miracles of Jesus. It is not a healing miracle. A healing

miracle is usually focused upon the needs of one person. It represents the restoration of what was lost, the regaining of health. When we speak of what Christ does in our lives we often say that '*Jesus saves.*' Jesus is the one who brings salvation. This is true. The healing miracles illustrate that truth. Salvation means, literally, *to be restored to health.* Jesus heals the physically sick, the broken and handicapped. He restores to health those who are spiritually lost, broken and crippled.

But this miracle is of a different nature. In multiplying the fish and loaves Jesus is not mending the broken. He is creating. He is filling the void. This miracle is not for the blessing of one person or family. It involves many people, literally thousands. The miraculous multiplication of bread and fish provides the maintenance of life, not the restoration of something that had been lost.

Food and bread are everyday things. Eating meals together is something we do, day in and day out. Wise families share meal times together. Most of the time, there is nothing special or exemplary about the meals we share together as families. That is okay. The focus of this miracle is upon sustaining, not restoring. There is the miracle of the multiplication of the bread and fish. Yet on a basic level, Jesus is doing something that is day-to-day and ordinary: sharing a meal with others. This points us to our understanding of the activity of Christ in our midst, day in and day out. This is what he does, even when we do not realize that he is the one who is doing it for us.

The spiritual reality addressed in this miracle is that Jesus sustains us. He gives to us our daily bread. The question raised is '*how are we to feed the multitude?*' Who has the resources to meet the need? The answer is that it is the Lord Christ who can do so. It is the Lord Jesus Christ who does so. All that we have is ours through his gracious gift.

The first meaning of the feeding of five thousand points us to Jesus as being greater than Moses. He is the fulfillment of what was promised in the Old Testament. He is greater than Moses. The second is that Jesus Christ meets the needs of those who turn to him in faith. It reminds us of Jesus Christ's role in sustaining the world he has created. The third meaning is even deeper and richer: Jesus Christ will give himself as the true bread from heaven, the true bread of God.

### **Jesus is the true bread of God.**

<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.

The people are hungry and they are in need of food. Jesus takes the small offering that is provided by the little boy. God is pleased to use the small things. And, in blessing that gift, he multiplies it so that it is sufficient to meet the needs of all those who are present and hungry. God takes what is offered and does miraculous things with it. We are told that everyone had as much as they wished.

Note that Jesus has everyone be seated in groups before he proceeds with the miracle. I do the same thing when we host church wide suppers here at the Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church: requiring that everyone be seated before I pray and open the serving line. The things of the spirit are given generously, but they are not given in haste. Jesus has them seated in groups in order that they might be served decently and in order. Nobody is rushing the table. Note that Jesus serves the people who are blessed through his chosen disciples. God gives the increase to the disciples who in turn are the ones to distribute it and give it to others. God's giving is abundant and overflowing: there are twelve baskets of leftovers collected when all had eaten.

Last week, under the leadership of Rev. Dan Stewart, we studied the story in chapter 5 of Jesus' healing of the man who had been lame for 38 years. The religious leaders do not rejoice at this man's remarkable healing, but instead object to Jesus performing this miracle *on the Sabbath*. Much of the rest of chapter 5 consists of Jesus' defense before these accusations.

A similar literary framework is at work here in chapter 6. This miracle becomes the subject matter of the discussions that follow in the rest of this chapter. For now, the key thing to note is that while the miracle is the multiplication of the loaves and fish, the meaning of this story is not in the miracle itself. In other words, John does not include this story to say to us, '*wow, Jesus did something truly amazing that afternoon on the grassy plains of Galilee.*' The point is not so much that Jesus gave bread to the crowds, but rather that in doing he is providing a symbol of the true bread of life that he would one day give to those who are his own. In this passage, Jesus gives bread to sustain physical life. In the same manner, there will come a time when Jesus will give himself as the true bread from heaven to sustain eternal life.

The first meaning of the feeding of five thousand points us to Jesus as the fulfillment of what was promised in the Old Testament. The second is that Jesus Christ meets the needs of those who turn to him in faith. The third meaning is event deeper and richer: Jesus Christ will give himself as the true bread from heaven, the true bread of God. Finally, the last point: do not miss the point: Jesus is much more than a prophet.

### **Do not miss the point: Jesus is much more than a prophet.**

<sup>14</sup> When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"

<sup>15</sup> 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.

Do you realize that a person can understand and even believe in the reality of the miracle that took place that day and still miss the point of what it all means? This is the ironic response of the crowd to Jesus' miracle. They saw the sign and concluded: *wow, this guy must be a prophet. We think, 'that's good.'* No, that's bad.

In Peru there is an ice cream company called Danafria. During the summer months, the company sends its agents out in yellow, pedal-powered carts to sell ice cream. As we traveled around Peru as a family, we were repeatedly surprised to find these ice cream carts everywhere we went: sometimes even in remote areas along the beach or up in the mountains.

As we will learn in the rest of chapter 6, which we will not look at today, many of the people who experienced this miracle understood it only horizontally. They failed to understand the true significance of **who** Jesus was; to see the true significance of the miracle he performed. They thought he was a prophet. They wanted to make him king. Jesus, to their minds, was like those Danafria ice cream carts, a first century food truck, able to feed them in the wilderness. Their eyes saw the miracle, and their taste buds savored it. But they saw it solely horizontally. They wanted historical release from **Roman** rule, not the advent of the **Kingdom of God**. They wanted miraculous meals of bread and fish, not the heavenly feast of the Kingdom. The miracle was a sign, intended to point them to God. They saw only the baskets of bread and fish that were the leftovers. Indeed, by the end of chapter 6, this miracle has generated so much controversy that in the end, it may have drawn more people away from Christ, than to him. This too, can be part of God's sovereign purpose. Charles Wesley once asked his brother John, after he had returned from a preaching tour of Ireland if, as a result of his preaching, there had been "*many additions to the church?*"

'No,' John Wesley replied, '*but there were several blessed subtractions.*'

Jesus Christ offers more than loaves and fishes. People come to Christ for all sorts of reasons. Some people come to Christ looking for personal benefit; some looking for a teacher; others looking for sympathy; still others come simply out of curiosity. The key thing is to learn to see Jesus not for what we want out of him, but for who he truly is. What is he revealing to us about himself; not what we expect, but what we encounter? Jesus was both a prophet and a king: the crowd surrounding him that day got that part right. But he is so much more. He is the fulfillment of all that was promised, prophesied, and foreshadowed in the **Old Testament**. He is the one who meets the needs of those who come to him. He is the **Word of God**. He has come down from heaven. He gives us daily bread, to be sure. But more than that, he gives us himself, for he is the **Bread of Life**.

Turn to Christ today. Embrace him. Call him Lord.

Say 'Amen' Somebody



John 6:1 – 4

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