

**John:  
What Difference Does a  
Few Thousand Make?**

**John 6:1-15**

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After these things Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (or Tiberias). A large crowd followed Him, because they saw the signs which He was performing on those who were sick. Then Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat down with His disciples. Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was near. Therefore Jesus, lifting up His eyes and seeing that a large crowd was coming to Him, said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these may eat?" This He was saying to test him, for He Himself knew what He was intending to do. Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little." One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are these for so many people?" Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. Jesus then took the loaves, and having given thanks, He distributed to those who were seated; likewise also of the fish as much as they wanted. When they were filled, He said to His disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments so that nothing will be lost." So they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten. Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world." So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.

Now let's pray:

*Our Father in heaven, break Thou the bread of life dear Lord to me. For Jesus' sake, Amen.*

Someone once asked Bertrand Russell, the philosopher who spent his entire life, more or less, claiming that there was no God, and coming up with a new philosophy, someone once said, every other month, if he were to meet God after he had died, what would he say to God? And Bertrand Russell said, "I would look Him in the eye and say, 'Not enough evidence.'" Startling, isn't it? John, here in

his gospel, is giving us evidence. He's giving us what he calls "signs" of the existence, the deity, the personality of Jesus, the Son of God.

This particular story that we have before us tonight, is the feeding of the five thousand, and actually, there are six stories. There's another story of the feeding of the four thousand which occurs in two of the other gospels, but this particular story of the feeding of the five thousand, a different incident at a different occasion, is recorded in all four gospels. So we have six similar stories in the gospels.

The early church, you see, believed that there was something in this story that taught us something very particular about Jesus. Previously we saw in John chapter 5 that the whole point of John chapter 5 is the same point in John 6: To ask the question, "Who is Jesus?" Who, in the world, is Jesus? Jesus had healed a man on the Sabbath day and He had gone on to say something of this order, "If you're incensed by that, you haven't begun to hear the kind of things I want to tell you. You think that I'm claiming to be equal with God? Which is what they thought. You haven't heard the *half* of it, Jesus says. And He goes on to give testimony as to His divine deeds, as to His divine knowledge, as to His divine prerogatives, as to His divine authority, and as to the fact that He asks for divine worship.

Now in chapter 6, we have two more signs that claim once again, something of the deity of Jesus—the feeding of the five thousand and the walking on the Sea of Galilee. I want us this evening to focus on Jesus and I want us to look at the disciples and I want us to look at the multitude.

### **I. Jesus' compassion.**

First of all, I want us to look at Jesus. What we have here is an illustration of the *compassion* of Jesus. Mark tells us that Jesus was tired; He had been preaching and teaching and performing healing miracles. He's crossed the Sea of Galilee, and we're not sure quite where, but from the northeast section of the Sea of Galilee, crowds are beginning to follow Him. Seeing Him with the disciples who are out on boats on the sea, they're walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee making their way to the other side of the sea. Jesus, when He gets there, climbs a mountain—it's probably not anything like a mountain that comes into your mind—but at least a slope of some kind; and He sees this great throng of people coming towards Him. He's moved with compassion; He teaches them. No doubt, perhaps, He has been teaching and preaching for some considerable length of time. There were no complaints about the length of Jesus' sermons. That may well explain why Jesus feels some kind of obligation now to feed them. It's a crowd in the region of five thousand men, and women and children; so perhaps ten thousand, perhaps twelve thousand—a lot of people. And Jesus is moved with compassion because they're hungry. Now, they are not starving--this is not a

picture out of some African country of children with extended stomachs and rib cages prominent, with all of the signs of malnutrition--that's not the scene. All they've done is perhaps miss a meal or two. They could have survived; He could have sent them home. He could have said, "It's time to go home, now. Make your journey home. Look after yourselves." But He's concerned about something as trivial, and on one level, this is trivial, not a big issue; this is just one meal--a little bit of food to give us that sense of comfort and well being after you've eaten. Are you with me? And Jesus is concerned about that.

I was taken aback by that this week as I was thinking about it, that something as inconsequential, something as small and trivial as one meal, and Jesus is concerned about that. That is the kind of God we have tonight--God who is concerned about little things. He's concerned about food and welfare and provision. He's concerned about feeding this multitude; that they would have food to eat. It's an illustration of His compassion, but it's also an illustration of how Jesus will meet the smallest inconsequential things in our lives. Maybe tonight if I were to ask for prayer requests, you'd be too embarrassed to put up your hand and say, "You know, I didn't have lunch today; I haven't eaten yet." I can't imagine any of these in the multitude saying something like that, and yet, that's the level, the extent, that's how far Jesus will go to meet the needs of His people. Our God is a compassionate God. There is no limit to His compassion and His mercy and His kindness.

## **II. Jesus' supremacy.**

But it's also an illustration of Jesus' supremacy. What we have here is a wonderful picture of the majesty of Jesus. Five thousand men, maybe twelve thousand individuals, and Jesus feels obligated to feed them. There's only one boy, with five loaves and two fishes. Five barley loaves. Barley was for poor people. This wasn't the best kind of bread, this was just poor man's bread. And five fishes, maybe pickled fish. A little lunch box, that you pack for the children when you pack them off to school in the morning, you know, when they carry their little lunch box with them. That's all it is.

But what happens here is not a miracle of sharing. O, you just have to laugh when liberals who can't see miracles when they're staring them in the face, try to say to us, "What happened here was that everybody had brought food, but the real miracle was that they shared it with each other." That's not what John is saying. John is saying, that out of these five loaves and two fish Jesus multiplied it to feed maybe twelve thousand people. It demonstrates the divine power and majesty of Jesus. It's a sign, John tells us, of the transcendence of Jesus. It's a witness to His divine attributes. It says something of His invincible power over nature, over creation, over bread, over atoms and molecules and forces. This is the one who defies gravity and walks on the water. He defies disease and death. It's a picture of His inscrutable grandeur. It demonstrates the power of His will.

Every particle in the universe is subject to Jesus. There are no recalcitrant forces in this universe. There are no black holes that defy His will. Everything is subject to Him. Everything. Nothing can stand its ground against Jesus and say to Him, "Thus far and no further."

In Tolkien's, *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf stands on the stone bridge with staff in hand and says to Balrog, "You shall not pass." Well, this is Jesus, saying to every force in the entire universe, "I am King, you see. My will is supreme." Everything is subject to Him. There is not a square inch of this entire universe over which Jesus does not say, "Mine." Do you see what this says. The will of God, the will of Jesus, is the most ultimate thing in all the universe. What's the most ultimate thing in all the universe? It's not some starwarsian "force be with you." It's not some "inner light." It's not some impersonal, rationality that insures the coherence of everything. It is the will of Jesus Christ, before whom every knee shall bow and tongue confess that He is Lord of all. Our galaxy, the center of which is 25,000 light years from here, is a place with black holes, white dwarfs, and neutron stars and super nova, in a sea of million degree gas. And there are some 200 billion solar systems in our galaxy, and then there are billions of galaxies. The mind boggles. And Jesus is Lord over every single one.

You see, what we have here is a miracle. It's a miracle. Now, people balk, of course, at miracles. If you assume in advance that miracles cannot occur, you've got a problem here. I love that illustration of C.S. Lewis that says, "Imagine a world that's only two dimensional. And a three dimensional person visits that world. He can appear in and out, he can pass through that two dimensional world, and it will appear to that two dimensional world as though something weird and wonderful and miraculous has happened."

Well, the Son of God is here. The Lord of Glory is on earth. And in the power of His world He needs only speak the word, and it is done. "Who is He in yonder stall, at whose feet the shepherd fall. Tis the Lord, tis the Lord, O wondrous story, tis the Lord, the King of Glory." This is one of His creation miracles. This is one of His miracles in which demonstrates His sovereign power over the universe. You know what this says? It's like a little foretaste, not only that the King of Creation is walking the stands of Palestine, but the King of the New Creation is here. This is just a little glimpse, a little foretaste, that one day all the effects of the curse will be removed and the King of Creation will transform this fallen world to become the new creation that will be to His praise and His glory. "Even now," Paul says, "this creation groans and travails in birth, waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God." And here on this hillside, northeast of the Sea of Galilee, there was just a little glimpse of that coming day..

### **III. Then, we have the disciples.**

Jesus says to Phillip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" And in

verse 6, John tells us very clearly, "He said this to test him, because He knew in advance what He was going to do." This question that Jesus put to Phillip, is a question that He could put to you or to me this evening. Where are we going to find bread for these people to eat? It's a question that says, is Jesus big enough, in Phillip's mind, for this problem? And here's a problem, here's an enormous problem, here's a very real difficulty, and is there a problem that's too big for Jesus to handle? It's a test.

My friends, are those worry beads working overtime in your mind and in your heart? And you're saying, "This is a problem that's too big for Jesus." You're saying, "There is absolutely nothing that we can do here." And you've given in and you've become discouraged and you've become downcast and you've become defeatist about it. And here is Jesus, standing before Phillip, and Andrew is doing Math 101, "200 denarii." A denari is what a man would earn in a day, so that's 200 day's worth of wages, a lot of money. It wouldn't be sufficient to give this crowd just a little bit to eat. Mathematically, from our resources, this is impossible. Now, unless we appear a little harsh on Phillip and Andrew, remember that Jesus has already performed miracles like this. In Cana of Galilee, you remember, He had the water pots filled with water and turned it into wine. They've already seen what Jesus is able to do, and they are overlooking the very one who is standing in their midst and asking them, "Where are we going to find enough to feed these people?"

You know, this story is like so many situations in our life, isn't it? And in the life of the church. A problem arises, a difficulty arises, and we don't have the resources to meet it. We don't have the wherewithal, we don't have the gifts, we don't have the ability, we don't have the financial resources, we don't have the manpower, we don't have the skill; it's a problem that's too big for us. Exactly. And man's extremity is God's opportunity. Where are we going to find sufficient to feed these people? At the hands of Jesus, that's the answer. A simple answer. At the hands of Jesus. And what this passage is teaching is that there's no problem, there is no problem no matter what it is, that the gospel of Jesus Christ can't deal with. The problems of this city, the problems of the state, the problems of this nation. Or, let's get more personal, the problem in your home, the problem in your marriage, the problem in your place of work. There is no problem too big for Jesus to handle. You see, the real crisis, my friends, is our lack of confidence and lack of faith in Jesus.

This Christmas time, as we're hurrying to and fro and doing all sorts of weird and wonderful things, I think Jesus wants us sometimes just to stop and reckon on this very point: "Are you reckoning on the power of Jesus to transform? Are you reckoning on His grandeur? Are you reckoning on His power? Are you reckoning on His deity?"

There's something I want us to notice here. Jesus could have just brought bread and fish into existence. He could have snapped His fingers and they could have

appeared. Jesus could do that. And instead, just as He had done at Cana of Galilee when they had filled the water pots with water, so here, He takes a little boy's lunch box, He takes five barley loaves and some fish, and out of that multiplies it to feed the multitude.

Why? Maybe you don't ask questions like that. Maybe my mind is going in a different direction here, but I ask myself, "Why? Why didn't He just create it out of nothing?" That would be a spectacular miracle, wouldn't it? Why didn't He, just out of nothing, truckloads of lavish foods, Christmas fare. Why didn't He do that? Do you remember that point in Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, after winning the battle against the Witch, and Aslan feeds the army. And Lewis puts it like this, "How Aslan provided food for them all, I don't know. But somehow or other, they found themselves all sitting on the grass to a fine, high tea at about eight o'clock." That is so terribly English.

When you're trying to teach your children something, you can do it one of two ways. You can snatch it from the child and say, "Here, let me show you how to do this." And you do it and hand it back. Wrong. Guilty. What you're supposed to do is take their little hands and gently do it so that it appears they are doing it themselves. And you know, I think there's something of that here. That Jesus is saying, "Whatever you've got, it may be small, it may be very, very small, but let Me take it and let Me use it and let Me use it in a way that will astound you."

Can we pull back from the story a moment and see a principle here? "What can I do for Jesus? What can I do for the kingdom? I've got so very little." Actually, we've got a whole lot at First Presbyterian Church, so I'm stretching the point here. But at a personal level you may be saying, 'I've got so little.' But in the hands of Jesus Christ, that "little" can become something enormously significant. He can take what gifts He has given you, what provisions He has given you, small as they may be, and Jesus is saying to us, "Just give it to Me. Give it to Me, and let Me use it for My glory." You've got a little voice, and you can vocalize the words, "Jesus is Lord. Jesus died for me." And God can use that small, tiny little voice to multiply His kingdom, because He does it again and again and again. That's why He blesses the food, I think, because it helped these disciples to see that the first thing we need to do, with however little we've got, is to give acknowledgement that it all comes from Him. That it all comes from him.

#### **IV. And then there is the multitude.**

We're told that this multitude had come along, partly because they had seen, verse 2, "the signs that He was doing on the sick." And then toward the end of the passage, "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." And what they said in verse 14 was this: "This is indeed the prophet who has come into the world." They saw the sign. And they saw the miracle. And they were

ready to draw some conclusions, but they were the wrong conclusions.

Just this past month in India, thousands of people have been flocking to a church building in Bangalore, because a certain lady was feeding her children chapatis, the flat bread that Indians eat, and her daughter wouldn't eat it because it was burnt. And she lifted the chapati, and on the surface of this burnt chapati she saw a picture of Jesus. On a chapati. The sovereign God of heaven and earth was trying to communicate to her, she thought, in a burnt chapati. And she went to a parish priest, who immediately pronounced it to be a miracle and put it in a glass cage, and thousands of people, Hindus and Muslims, have been coming to see the picture of Jesus on a burnt chapati. People will believe anything. They saw this miracle that Jesus performed, but that did not signify that they had Jesus in their hearts, that they were crowning Him as Lord and Savior, as Prophet, Priest and King.

I don't why you are here today. Some of you might be here because there is a crowd here. Maybe you come to First Presbyterian Church on a Sunday morning or Sunday evening because you love to follow the crowd.

The question, my friends, for you today, and it's the most poignant question I can ask at Christmas time, "Are you coming because you love Jesus, are you coming because you've seen Him and owned Him and confessed Him to be your Lord and Savior?" Because I'm saying to you, don't stop coming to Him until you get that assurance. Let's pray together.

*Our Father in heaven, we thank You now for Your word, we thank You for this wonderful miracle and all that it teaches us. Use our meager talents and use them for your glory and for the extension of Your kingdom, for Jesus' sake, Amen.*

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