

John 6:1-15

After this, Jesus crossed over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (or Tiberias). ²A large crowd followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he was performing on those who were sick. ³Jesus went up on the hillside and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴The Jewish Passover Festival was near.

⁵When Jesus looked up and saw a huge crowd coming toward him, he asked Philip, “Where can we buy bread for these people to eat?” ⁶But Jesus was saying this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.

⁷Philip answered him, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to have just a little.”

⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ⁹“There’s a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what is that for so many people?”

¹⁰Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, so they sat down. There were about five thousand men.

¹¹Then Jesus took the loaves and, after giving thanks, he distributed pieces to those who were seated. He also did the same with the fish—as much as they wanted.

¹²When the people were full, he told his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over so that nothing is wasted.” ¹³So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with pieces from the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

¹⁴When the people saw the miraculous sign Jesus did, they said, “This really is the Prophet who is coming into the world.”

¹⁵When Jesus realized that they intended to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

More than a Meal

Did you ever notice that when you are on vacation you always seem to be able to find someone with whom you have something in common? Here at home you see a Michigan license plate and it doesn’t even register. Far from home that same license plate brings a sense of comradery—of some kind of shared experience or shared knowledge.

And so it is that when you see a t-shirt like this one about the unsalted beaches in Michigan out in—say—Colorado, you stop and engage in some conversation with the person wearing the t-shirt. It’s just a little something to start a conversation and see how many things you have in common.

Through Moses God had commanded: “Three times a year all your men must appear before the LORD your God at the place he will choose: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles” (Deuteronomy 16:16, NIV84). The place the Lord God had chosen had long been established by the time of Jesus—it was the temple in Jerusalem.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread—Passover—was one of the three feasts. “The Jewish Passover Festival was near” (John 6:3, EHV). And so it was that thousands of people were on the move throughout Judea—all heading to Jerusalem for Passover. Only the men were *commanded* to appear before the Lord, so some might have been on the road without their families, but tradition was that this was to be a festival celebrated as a family. Many families were making their way toward Jerusalem.

At every rest area along the way clumps of people would find something in common and discussions would ensue. The latest gossip was exchanged. One topic seemed to keep bubbling up to the surface—Jesus. This Son of a carpenter was creating quite a stir. Word was that he was a great Teacher—I mean *great!* *Nobody* could teach with the same kind of authority as he seemed to command. It was said he wasn’t much to look at, exactly, but his *words*... oh his *words!* They just seemed to be filled with eloquence and depth of meaning. There was something else, too. Jesus was said to have great power. He could do things no one else seemed to be able to do. Everyone wanted to find out more.

The events of last week’s Gospel showed the disciples gathered around Jesus to give a report of the missionary trip they had just concluded. Jesus decided that the Twelve needed a break, so they got on a boat to go to a solitary place.

Their departure did not go unnoticed. Any number of people were capable seafarers themselves, and could figure out where the boat was headed. Jesus' boat didn't have a pair of Cummins 6.7 liter marine diesel engines on board. The Sea of Galilee isn't nearly as big as "unsalted" Lake Michigan. The image shows modern Israel superimposed on Lake Michigan. That top little dot of light blue is the Sea of Galilee. It was a pretty simple matter for the people to make a mad dash around the lake to try to intercept Jesus.

The clumps of people leisurely gossiping at the rest areas were interrupted by these frenzied groups moving with a purpose. The information quickly spread—*Jesus* was on his way to the other side. Join us and you might be able to see him and hear him speak. The crowds grew.

II.

Jesus did not disappoint. He met with the people. He taught the people. When it got to be mid-afternoon it was apparent the crowd was going to be getting hungry soon. "He asked Philip, 'Where can we buy bread for these people to eat?' ⁶But Jesus was saying this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. (John 6:5-6, EHV).

There were *a lot* of people sitting in their various clumps on the hillside that day. Philip was a pragmatist and did some quick math. "Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to have just a little" (John 6:7, EHV). A denarius was about a day's wages. One person working six days a week would need over 33 weeks to earn enough money to give everyone on the hillside just a little bit of food.

Isn't it interesting that Philip had been with Jesus for quite some time already, and he *still* didn't realize that regular math didn't always provide a complete answer? Philip knew the treasury bag carried by Judas didn't have nearly enough money in it to pay the restaurant tab for this huge crowd. Lacking in faith, he was stumped. It's a common problem for Christians. Lacking faith, we forget that the Lord has means at his disposal that are beyond math and logic.

"One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹'There's a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what is that for so many people?'" (John 6:8, EHV). Andrew pipes up with information about what the group *does* have on hand, but just like Philip, he doesn't take the divine into account.

Information from the other three gospels suggests this boy might have been carrying some food for the disciples. Others think he might have just been the only boy to think ahead and grab a lunchbag off the kitchen counter before he headed off to this great adventure with the rest of the crowd. In either case, the information John gives in our Gospel today adds something the others omit. The loaves of bread were made of barley. These were made from the coarsest grain, not something a person of means would usually choose. As for the fish, only John uses the word for *small* fish—perhaps some sardines or dried herring.

III.

"Have the people sit down" (John 6:10, EHV), Jesus told them.

Though the disciples had failed to use divine math in calculating the costs and possibilities of acquiring dinner for the crowd, when Jesus told them to seat the assembly, they didn't hesitate. 5,000 men were seated. "Not even counting women and children" (Matthew 14:21, EHV), Matthew specifies.

The disciples returned to stand next to Jesus. At least 7,500 pairs of eyes were all fixed on Jesus, wondering what would happen next.

Picture it. A table cloth laid out on a rock, the contents of the coarse basket set to the side carefully spread out on the cloth.

Just like all the fathers would do for their families at the Passover Festival a few days in the future, Jesus stretches out his hands. He speaks the same blessing every father would use at the celebration:

Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam, hamotzi lehem min ha'aretz.

"Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth."

There it was, just hanging out there. The blessing pronounced over this meager fare. "Then Jesus

took the loaves and, after giving thanks, he distributed pieces to those who were seated. He also did the same with the fish—as much as they wanted” (John 6:11, EHV).

Imagine the astonished looks and the chatter at the groups of 50 and 100 that were spread out around the hillside! The disciples kept going to Jesus at that same rock and kept bringing more of the food he kept breaking off and distributing!

The blessing that had been used for thousands of years seemed to take on new meaning. “Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth.” None of them even had to do any work to get this bread from the earth! It just came from the hands of Jesus. It was the LORD our God, King of the universe, bringing forth bread from the earth—right before their very eyes!

“When the people saw the miraculous sign Jesus did, they said, “This really is the Prophet who is coming into the world”” (John 6:14, EHV). These days people are all about looking for things that are sustainable. *This* was the definition of sustainable! If Jesus could take this paltry meal and multiply it thousands of times over, just think what he could do to establish a sustainable lifestyle that would be nothing but pure enjoyment all the time!

“When Jesus realized that they intended to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself” (John 6:15, EHV). Sustainability meant to the crowd that they should take Jesus and make him “King of the universe,” just like the blessing said. They need never lift a finger in their own support ever again.

IV.

Sadly, they had missed the point of the whole miracle. Yes, Jesus demonstrated unequivocally that he was the King of the Universe and that he could do *anything*. But the things he had been teaching and preaching to them focused on their spiritual needs.

In the Gospel readings from the next several weeks Jesus will expand and expound on this theme. Yes, Jesus provides bread, but this earthly bread is just a foretaste of something far better. Yes, Jesus *can* deal with any human need and every sickness and sorrow that comes your way, but there are things far more important than physical needs.

Jesus didn’t allow the crowd to satisfy the greed that quickly consumed them, but withdrew. They needed to understand he had come to deal with *spiritual* needs.

The crowd had come to satisfy their own curiosity about Jesus. Some had come seeking healing for themselves or their loved ones.

Curiosity had been satisfied. They had seen with their own eyes his power. In fact, they had tasted and seen the goodness of the Lord their God, the King of the Universe, as they ate the bread and fish broken and distributed by his hand.

Tummies filled, they had plenty to mull over. It should have been crystal clear that there was more to all this than just a satisfying meal. There was more to this than a sustainable earthly existence.

Sadly, not everyone saw it. Sadly, still today not everyone sees it. Filled with greed, too many want Jesus to just be their Bread King—satisfying their every whim and desire in *this* life—forgetting that he has come to do so much more.

Jesus is the Bread of Life. He will talk about himself that way in the Gospel Readings in the weeks to come. Even at the Feeding of the 5,000 Jesus was pointing to himself as the one who could sustain their *eternal* existence. He is the living Bread who gives *eternal* life. We eat that eternal food as we listen to his Word. We receive that eternal food in his body and blood, in, with, and under the bread and the wine in his Supper.

I wonder what the topics of discussion were like at the rest areas as the crowds disbursed and continued their journeys from that hillside to Jerusalem for the Passover. I hope and pray many of them recognized their sins of greed—whether greed for money and property, or greed for physical health and well-being—and realized that those sins were what this great Teacher and Preacher had come to deal with. I hope and pray they realized that this whole excursion was more than a meal. God grant that you and I recognize that same thing always. Amen.