John 6:1-14 Sermon – Feeding the Five Thousand

Let's pray: Lord we pray that as we hear your word, we ask that it would not be simply dry words on a page, but would be living water poured into our hearts by your Holy Spirit. That as we hear your word that it would be as feeding on the bread of life, nourishing us to eternity. We pray that your word will not return empty, but will accomplish that purpose which you sent it, glorifying you in all things. Amen.

Today, we move to the story of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand. It is the only story about a miracle that is in every gospel account, and for good reason, it says something very important about Jesus. That Jesus can perform any miracles at all is important, but that he performs this particular one is especially important. This miracle tells us an essential part of who Jesus is, and why he has come, linking it to a central story in the Old Testament.

Let's hear God's Word, John 6:1-15:

Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), [2] and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick. [3] Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. [4] The Jewish Passover Festival was near.

[5] When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" [6] He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

[7] Philip answered him, "It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"

[8] Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, [9] "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"

[10] Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). [11] Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

[12] When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." [13] So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

[14] After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." [15] Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Have you ever, out of a desire to reach someone for Christ, wanted to perform some kind of outlandish miracle? You think to yourself, if I could only heal this person, or perform a sign like Moses, or Jesus, or Paul from Scripture, then everyone we love would turn and believe.

When I was a little kid, I remember thinking like this. I didn't have many Christian friends. I went to a public elementary school and all the kids on my block weren't Christians. I had some evangelistic fervour for them, but any attempt to draw with the beauty of heaven or the fear of hell would not work. From my extremely limited ten-year-old perspective, it had to be something extraordinary to jar them from their secular mindset!

If I told you what I prayed earnestly for God to do, I might die of embarrassment. But that's beside the point. The real question is, why wouldn't God do something like that? Why does God choose to do some miraculous things, like our story in the Bible, but not when I want to lead my friends to Christ, or heal an illness to save someone from dying.

I have heard a similar kind of thing from a few prominent atheists. They say, "if God wants me to believe in him, why doesn't he just make himself obvious? Put a big sign in the sky saying "here I am" or whatever." These would be really practical things from our perspective. We have needs that we feel need to be met if we are going to believe and trust in God. We want practicality. We want a god who is going to meet us on our terms.

Our story for this morning shows us that's not how God's kingdom works. This morning, we come to what we might think is simply a story of a miracle. People are hungry, and Jesus feeds them. Jesus has already shown us that he is capable of doing extraordinary things, things that show his power over his creation. We have also noticed that when Jesus does these things he doesn't do them just for their own sake, to impress people, or to show his power, but he teaches us to look through them as they speak to who he is and why he is here.

Augustine says, if we fail to look through the miracle to see why Jesus is doing this particular thing, then we are like those who open a book and marvel at someone's penmanship without actually reading his words. Yes, the miracle impresses, it is meant to do that. Yes, it shows us Jesus' ability, that he is in control of his creation. Yes, Jesus' miracles substantiate his message, if he is able to do these great things, then we should listen to him. But, if we fail to see what his sign means, then it goes to waste in a sense. Jesus could have done any act of power to impress, show his ability, to substantiate his message, but he, in all his wisdom has chosen to do this thing, to feed a large group of people who have followed him into the wilderness.

If you have been paying attention as to *how* to look through Jesus' miracles to see what he is saying with them, you'll know that seeing if there is any correspondence to what happened in the Old Testament is key. Jesus does not come out of nowhere; he comes to fulfill what God has been promising all along, preparing a way for Jesus to come.

This story is no exception, Jesus is fulfilling a central story of Israel. John tells us that that it was close to the Passover Feast. This isn't just so we know roundabout what time of year it is, but what Jesus is about to do has to do with the story of the exodus from Egypt.

Slide 9

The story of the Passover, the Exodus, and the wandering in the desert, will be familiar to many of you. In fact, in the feeding of the five thousand, we see many allusions to the story of the Israelites in Exodus, being brought out of Egypt, and Numbers, as they wander in the desert. Just as the Israelites crossed the Red Sea after seeing many miracles in Egypt, our story begins with Jesus crossing the sea of Galilee, only to find a great crowd following him after seeing his miracles. Just as after they cross the Red Sea, Moses retreats from the crowd up a mountain, Jesus too gets away from this crowd, and goes up a mountainside and sits down with his disciples. All of this is a wink and a nudge to everyone, telling them that what God did in the Exodus is now being fulfilled by Jesus.

Slide 10

These aspects of the story are not the focus though, as the story goes on, we see Jesus focus particularly on one aspect of the wandering in the wilderness, getting manna from heaven. After the Israelites exit Egypt and cross the Red Sea, one of the first stories we get is Israel grumbling that they don't have any food as they wander in the wilderness on their way to their home in the promised land. It's not like they can fill their bags with cliff bars. So God gives them manna each morning, a kind of bread that miraculously arises out of the ground.

This story of manna is a central story for Israel, to show them how God will provide for them despite their grumbling at the way he does it. That the Israelites were grumbling in the desert might seem like a small thing. Who wouldn't grumble in the desert after fleeing security and now sitting in some wilderness with nothing to eat. But that they are grumbling after such a dramatic rescue from Egypt shows their hearts, they wanted God to do what they wanted, and were not willing to follow as he desired, putting their trust in him. Even after seeing extraordinarily miraculous events, like the parting of the Red Sea, their hearts are not changed.

This is the same impulse in human nature is what Jesus is dealing with in our story. Christ is coming to save us, as he saved Israel out of Egypt. Christ is coming to be king, but not on

our terms. Jesus knows that seeing all kinds of miracles alone will not change hearts, despite what we might think. Just as in the Exodus, Christ is going to make his people, and this is a job only he can do.

Just like Moses in the desert, the disciples had no way to care for the needs of God's people. They were reliant on God's gift. When Jesus asks if they should go and buy food for all these people, he asks knowing their inability. Phillip says, it would take an extraordinary amount of money to feed these, something like $25,000 in our money. This gives $5 to each man, let alone the women and children (maybe he was thinking they could all share a $5 footlong from subway or something, I don't know).

Slide 11

After Philip says they have no ability to feed these people, Andrew finds a boy with five small barley loaves and two fish. We aren't told if Andrew brought this boy forward in jest, or of he simply wanted to give Jesus an inventory of what he found. I imagine Jesus simply pats them on the back and gives Philip and Andrew a smile and then has the group sit before him on a plain. Jesus then gives thanks, and distributes these five loaves and two fish until everyone has their fill. Just like God in the wilderness after the Exodus, Jesus will care for our needs as we follow him, even if we don't know how.

John says that the crowd that has gathered here has come because they saw Jesus perform miracles. These people who followed Jesus were likely drawn to the spectacle, wanting to get a glimpse of something extraordinary like the healing at the pool or the water to wine. They wanted something like I wanted to show my friends when I was a kid, something to jar them out of their routines. In this sense, Jesus does not disappoint, I can imagine sitting in this crowd, on the hillside, watching everyone eat never-ending bread would be truly amazing. I think that's why the Olive Garden does it.

Slide 12

It is very important that Jesus says to his disciples after everyone has finished eating that they must gather the bread that is left over so that nothing would be wasted. Why is this? It speaks to the nature of the kingdom that Jesus is bringing, an eternal one.

In the story of the manna, the Israelites were to gather only what they needed for the day. Anything that they gathered beyond this would rot by the next morning. It taught them to trust God daily to provide what they needed, this was good and necessary for that time. But in contrast to this quickly rotting bread, Jesus' bread is different, just like his new covenant and kingdom is different than that which was preparing for it.

The crowd doesn't understand the nature of Jesus' kingdom though. They see Jesus' miracles and want to make him their king, into a kingdom fitted to their desires. John says, "After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself."

Slide 13

One commentator says, "the Passover Feast was to Palestinian Jews what the fourth of July is to Americans, or, better, what the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne is to loyalist Protestants in Northern Ireland. It was a rallying point for intense, nationalistic zeal."[1] The story of the Passover is where Israel gets their freedom from Egypt and is the first step in being saved from slavery and becoming their own people with their own land. Their freedom from oppression is annually celebrated to remind them of who they are because of what God has done. This crowd, getting prepared for Passover, might be thinking to themselves, "ah, the new prophet has come at the Passover, and now we will rebuild our kingdom!" The people are right to see Jesus' signs and recognize the coming messiah, and the new kingdom, but they are wrong in what that kingdom will look like. They forget that it is God who makes his kingdom, no one else.

That there was five thousand men is emphasized to show the possible guerilla force that Jesus had at his fingertips. If he wanted to be a revolutionary and overthrow the Romans, here was his chance. Jesus, however, didn't want anything like that. His kingdom wasn't going to look like anything that has ever existed in the world before. When Mark recounts this story, he says the crowd was "like sheep without a shepherd," but they likely felt like they were an army without a general. Eventually, a false messiah general would come for this army eventually, and they would be decimated by the Romans, and Jerusalem razed.

Slide 14

Jesus tells them to gather the bread because in Jesus' new kingdom the bread lasts. Jesus will go on and speak about the need for himself like the need for a "bread of life." Jesus says, "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life…" He goes on to say, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." He says this to show the people that he is what the Old Testament manna was pointing to. They look back at the Manna from heaven, the Exodus from Egypt, and think that is as good as it gets. They wanted Jesus to be a king on their

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[1] D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 269.

terms, like they imagine him to be. They want to be wowed with miracles on their terms. Jesus, however, came with an eternal kingdom that nobody expects, one that "is not of this world," as he tells Pilate before his execution.

Not only were there leftovers, but it is emphasized that there were twelve baskets with the pieces of barely bread left over. Every gospel account of this story calls attention to the number of baskets that were left over. It is no coincidence that this number is the number of tribes that are in Israel, and the number of disciples Jesus had. It is clear that in this Jesus is showing what is going to create God's kingdom on earth, he is going to remake his people as he made them the first time in the Exodus. This time however, the bread that he will give them is his body, and the salvation he will give is eternal, not simply from the Egyptians.

We see something of this eternal kingdom in the church today, but we are mostly still waiting for God to found it among us. We are very much like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, we have been saved, brought through the waters of the Red Sea in baptism (as we saw in the baptisms earlier), living off of the bread from heaven in the Lord's Supper, and waiting for God to bring us into his kingdom when he comes again.

Sometimes we can look just like these people that gathered to see Jesus' miracles and wanted to turn him into a king of their liking. We want to turn Jesus' kingdom into something we want it to look like, rather than what he gives us. We want extraordinary miracles on our terms, but it is in the humility of the Lord's Supper that we see him, in hearing the Word that he transforms our hearts, not in the grand miracles that we desire. When we make those the centrepiece of our religion, some kind of flashy show to wow people, we don't build Christ's kingdom, but simply our own, and we all know how long those last.

This is why God doesn't simply make himself obvious to us whenever we want him to. He does things on his terms, not ours. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, we might grumble at the way he is saving us, bringing us through the desert of this world, but if he were to do everything on our terms, then that would make it our kingdom and not his. I don't know about you, but I would rather be a servant in the kingdom of God, than a king in hellscapes that we create for ourselves. I pray that we all have the humility to accept what God gives us with gratitude and praise rather than try to make him a king in our image.

Let's pray