

John 6:1-21 “When They Were Satisfied”
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Yesterday my wife and I were at my cousin’s wedding. I found myself daydreaming a little bit during the service thinking about what it will be like to walk my daughter, Sybil down the aisle. Then we went to reception and found out that there supposed to be 500 people at it. I got anxious just thinking about how much it’s going to cost when she gets married. I was distracted by that thought for the rest of the night. I don’t think I’m pessimist. But when I read the story of the feeding of the 5,000, I tend to line up with the disciple Philip, more than Andrew. Maybe that just makes me more pragmatic. I can easily see myself in that same situation saying to Jesus, “Are you insane? Do you know much that it’s going to cost to feed 5,000 people?” Or like that man who brought 20 loaves of barley bread in the 2 Kings passage and said in desperation, “How can I set this before a hundred people?”

Sometimes it’s easier to connect with that feeling of scarcity, then a feeling of abundance. This sense of “not enough” seems to permeate our society. It’s often what motivates us as consumers, when we see others having the things we want. Or maybe we feel it on Sunday afternoons, thinking about all the stuff we have to do next week, and wonder if we’ll have enough time to get everything done. This morning I want to talk about scarcity.

When the other gospel writers tell the story of the feeding of the 5,000 they add in details about Jesus teaching and even healing some of the sick that come to him. Yet, in John, the narrator adds a different detail, one more of theological significance than historical accuracy. In verse 4 we hear that the time of Passover was near. Why is this important? Well, unlike the other three gospels, the Gospel of John covers a three-year time period of Jesus’ ministry. We know this because the writer talks about the Passover three different times in his Gospel. Jesus’ public ministry begins with the cleansing the temple in chapter 2 during Passover. The second time is in our passage. Then culminating to a crescendo at the end of this Gospel Jesus dies on the cross while the lambs are being slaughtered for the Passover feast. Bringing to life John the Baptist’s prophetic words in John 1, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (v. 29)

As a result of Jesus dying the cross while the Passover lambs are being slaughtered, the Gospel of John is the only Gospel that doesn’t have the story of the Last Supper, where Jesus institutes the sacrament of communion. Instead we’re given the story Jesus washing the disciples’ feet. I say all this, because I think that the way the story of the feeding of the 5,000 is told in John 6 is meant to teach us something about the Lord’s Supper. I think this for three main reasons. First, in verse 4, as I’ve already shared, we are given the detail about it being the time of Passover. Secondly, in verse 11, we read, “Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated.” This language is similar to the words of institution said by Jesus in the other Gospels and given to us when Paul teaches on it in I Corinthians.

Finally, towards the end of chapter 6, on the next day, Jesus says to the crowd when they come back to see him that he is the “bread of life” and that anyone who eats of him will never hunger again. If that’s not obvious enough, somewhat redundantly, Jesus says to the Jewish leaders in verses 53-56, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.”

In English, in these four verses we see Jesus say the word “eat” three times. In Greek, Jesus uses two different words. The first time the word is “εσφαγω,” and just means “to eat.” But in verses 54 & 56 Jesus uses a different word, in Greek it’s “τρωγω,” which means to “crunch and munch.” As if to say: “Those who *crunch and munch* my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life. . . . Those who *crunch and munch* my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.” Jesus is saying that when we partake of communion we are *crunching* and *munching* his flesh. No wonder those who belonged to the early church were accused of being cannibals.

In our communion liturgy when we are invited to the table we hear the words, “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” The experience of communion is meant to be a tangible one. When we partake of the bread and drink the cup, we are feasting on the body and blood of Christ. By crunching and munching Christ body and drinking his blood we encounter the concrete person of Jesus Christ. It’s not the idea of what Christ did, or who we think Jesus is, but, rather the actual person of Jesus.

This feast that we share together, is more than a ritual. It nourishes us for eternal life. Through it we are able to abide in Jesus Christ. And as we abide in Christ we are made to bear good fruit as we minister to others. Later on in John 15:4, Jesus tells his disciples, after washing their feet, “Abide in me, as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine neither can you unless you abide in me.”

Think again about the boy who brought the five barley loaves and two fish. This boy was close enough to Jesus and his disciples that Andrew saw what he brought. The boy may have even overheard this conversation between Jesus and Philip and perhaps was engaged in conversation with them. This test that Jesus has for Philip has more to do with whether or not Jesus can feed this many people. Jesus is concerned with knowing who these people are. And so the real question is, can Philip see these 5,000 as more than just a number of mouths to feed, and actually see them as persons in need of a relationship with God the Father through Christ?

Now if, you’re anything like me, it’s easy to dwell on what it will cost me as an individual to enter into another person’s life. This boy who comes to Jesus, realizes that it will cost him this meal of bread and fish. At a time of scarcity, when your next meal wasn’t guaranteed, his generosity is astounding as he offers all he has. He does so, because of his indescribable hope that Jesus will transform the ordinary loaves of bread and fish, into something extraordinary. The boy makes this leap of faith, because he’s following the person of Jesus Christ, not the miracles he’s performed.

Likewise, Jesus is interested in the boy as a person. How do we know this? Because Jesus accepts the gift he gives. When you have 5,000 people to feed 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish aren’t going to go very far. When the boy offers his meal, I can picture Philip rolling his eyes at the kid and shooing him away as the adults take care of the real problem. Jesus sees the boy for who he is and accepts the gift, because he loves the boy.

When my brother Jon was in preschool around Christmas time he made this angel out of paper plates and glitter, brought it home and asked my parents if they could put it on the top of the tree. If you look at the angel, it’s kind of ugly. A five-year-old made it. The face was drawn in by pencil. The glitter seems to be thrown on it haphazardly. But for the past 30+ years it’s been on the top of my parents Christmas tree. Not because it’s beautiful to look at. But because of who made it and gave it as a gift to my parents.

In his book *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer urges us to make the shift from being loyal to the “idea of Christianity” to “following the personhood” of Jesus Christ. He says, “Discipleship is commitment to Christ. Because Christ exists, he must be followed. An idea about Christ, a doctrinal system, a general religious recognition of grace or forgiveness of sins does not require discipleship.”¹ Instead, what we often buy into is what Bonhoeffer would call “cheap grace,” grace that requires little more from us than one hour a week on Sunday mornings, in which we end up being a good consumer of the “idea” of Christianity, instead of a follower of Christ.

Discipleship requires us to deeply follow the person of Jesus Christ through abiding in him. The boy in our story followed Jesus the person, not the idea of a miracle worker. He saw that there was a need, and although it was completely inadequate, he offered what he had. Not because he believed that these loaves of bread and fish would fix the problem, but rather, because he believed that Jesus could take something ordinary and make it extraordinary.

At the church I used to serve in Peoria, IL, there was a widow named Linda. Linda once told this story to our community, and I have her permission to share it with you today. She used to teach fourth grade Sunday school. One year, on the first day of Sunday school, she told her class that her husband had just passed away that summer. One of the kids then asked her, “Mrs. Bush, what’s the hardest part about Mr. Bush not being with you anymore?” Linda paused. Thought for a moment, then said, “The hardest thing, is when I go to bed at night. I turn the lights off downstairs, and have to walk upstairs to my bedroom in complete darkness. As the darkness creeps in, I realize just how alone I am.”

The next week in Sunday school one of the boys brought a gift for her, saying, “Mrs. Bush, I get scared of the dark too. My mom and dad told me that I shouldn’t be afraid of the dark, because Jesus is light. They gave me this nightlight to remind me that Jesus is always near. Here, I got you one too, that way you can remember that Jesus is always with you.” This story shows us two things: the first is how God breaks into our everyday lives through the power of the Holy Spirit using others. Secondly, it shows us how God breaks into our lives as we serve one another being the branches on the vine that produce good fruit.

The boy in John 6 gives us this example of what it might look like to answer that call of discipleship. Perhaps in a more literal way, what it means to follow Christ as he offers up what he has for the community. He allows himself to be used in a new way that he never even dreamed was possible. Just as we believe every Sunday morning when we come together that God takes these ordinary elements of bread and wine and does something extraordinary to them. We become nourished by them, so that God might take some of the ordinary things of our lives and do something extraordinary with them, bringing forth an abundance of new life, in this world of scarcity. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, trans. Barbara and Reinhard Krauss Green (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 59.