

The Fourth Sign: The Feeding of the Five Thousand

John 6:1-15

(Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17)

John gives the reader an imprecise time frame by linking the previous material with the phrase “some time after this.” About one year has passed since the cleansing of the temple and the next Passover is near. (4) The other Gospel writers have made it clear that Jesus has spent the last year preaching in and around Galilee. However, in John’s account, this is the only event that that occurred in this region because he is most interested in Jesus’ preaching and teaching in and around the Jerusalem where the crowd was far more sophisticated. Their concerns were radically different from those who lived in Galilee and this accounts for the obvious uniqueness of his material as compared to the synoptic writers.

The people who came to hear Jesus on this day were simple peasant farmers. They worked for a subsistence wage so their concerns were much more basic. For them, survival was an ever day issue in contrast to the theoretical and theological issues of those who lived in Jerusalem.

The feeding of the five thousand must have been a particularly important event to the early church because it is the only miracle, apart from the resurrection, to appear in all four Gospels. The synoptic writers make it plain that this event took place shortly after a very successful time for the disciples. According to John, Jesus had “come away” with them for a period of respite but a crowd got wind of his whereabouts because of his miracles.
(2)

NOTE: See chart that compares the telling of this miracle by each Gospel writer.

He sat his disciples down on a hillside which today is probably the Golan Heights.

1:1-4

Taking into consideration what the other writers say about the size of the crowd it is quite possible that it numbered as much as ten thousand people. The mention of the Passover (4) is very important because it helps to make sense of the long discourse from 6:25-59 that is so closely related to this event. The fourth and fifth sign function as an introduction to the extended discourse that is recounted later in the chapter.

It is obvious from all the accounts of the other writers that Jesus really wanted time alone with his disciples so the gathering of the enormous crowd was an unintended consequence of the miracles he had performed. Jesus must have realized that both he and his disciples needed a time of refreshment.

There is an important lesson here. The disciples needed to be taught a deeper understanding of the kingdom that Jesus was inaugurating so that they would be able to continue his work after Pentecost. During Pentecost they recalled that he had taught them that the Holy Spirit would bring “all things to their remembrance”. The times the disciples spent alone with their master provided them with the spiritual capital used by the Holy Spirit to bring their faith to a confident maturity.

If this was a requirement for them then it is still an essential aspect of Christian maturity today. The importance of learning must never be regarded as an end in itself because it is no more important than the other Christian disciplines. However, one wonders if Biblical knowledge and study is valued today to the degree that the Lord's gathering of his disciples suggests it should be. **Today our cultural norms value the immediacy of experience and activity over knowledge and reflection. Could it be that the church today has been acculturated in this respect?**

The time Jesus spent with the disciples was not just for educational purposes alone. During these quiet times Jesus must have entered into much intimate conversation with those he had called for no other purpose than deepening his relationship with them. He wanted to do more than simply fill their heads with knowledge as a philosopher king might. He wanted them to know him and not just know about him and his message. He knew that only a personal relationship with him would sustain them through the dark valley that was ahead. At this point they probably had little idea of the suffering they would experience because of their faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

We, in this culture, do not suffer for our faith as they did but it remains true; without a personal relationship with the master to sustain us, cultural pressures and norms will swallow us up so that we are religious on the outside but secular within.

1:5-9

When Jesus saw the tremendous crowd gathering he tests Philip by asking him how the people are going to be fed even though Jesus already knew how he was going to respond to the crisis. Exactly what was Jesus testing? Philip's answer is that the problem was so great that eight months wages were not nearly enough to solve this overwhelming need. Philip was from nearby Bethsaida so he realized that there was no food source in the area sufficient to solve the problem. Philip has seen the master perform miraculous acts before but his response indicates that he is thinking in purely human terms without the expectation that Jesus will have the answer. He does not yet have a full understanding of who Jesus is so he is overwhelmed by the situation. Only with the passage of time will Philip come to a full understanding of Jesus' true nature. In this respect, he is very much like us.

Then Andrew speaks up by telling Jesus that there is some food available but it is hardly enough to feed the enormous crowd. At this point Andrew is

somewhat double minded. He mentions the boy because he believes that Jesus might be able to do something with this meager amount but before his report is complete his faith begins to weaken; "... how far will they go among so many?" Like us, he believes with the limitations of his immature faith.

1:10-13

Now Jesus takes what the boy has given, blesses it and distributes the barley loaves (food for the poor) and fish amongst the crowd. Everyone ate as much as they wanted and there was so much left over that the disciples had to gather it up.

Did John intend on saying something important to his readers by means of the young boy's inadequate but generous gift? Does he represent the fact that our gifts to Christ are made adequate only by the "saving" use he makes of them? If so, there is a word of encouragement here. Subjectively, we may not understand how our talents, gifts, and efforts could be adequate for the difficult problems in life and these subjective feelings may render us unable to act or trust. However, there is an objective truth present in this event; we need only to give what we have and God will do the rest.

Later on Jesus left with his disciples but again the crowd found him. Jesus told them that their interest in him was motivated by their desire for another free meal. A long discourse (6:25-59) follows that is introduced by the feeding miracle and the reader needs to make the connection between the discourse and the miracle. Jesus tells them the following using the metaphor of bread and water:

1. Do not work for the food that spoils.
2. Work for the food that endures and which he gives.
3. The God who gave Israel the bread of life in the wilderness is now offering them the true bread that gives life. He is that bread.
4. To believe in him is to never be hungry or thirsty.

The Theological Meaning of the Sign: (see Deuteronomy 8:1-20)

Later, when John's readers read his report of this miraculous feeding that took place during Passover season, they must have thought about all the events that led them from slavery in Egypt to the freedom of the promise land. Passover was the time when Israel celebrated God's faithfulness to them as he intervened in order to remain faithful to his covenantal promise. In particular, they would have connected the feeding of the five thousand with Deuteronomy 8. In this chapter the writer reminds his people of how God lead them in the desert. He says that God fed them and reminded them that "man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." (8:3b)

Again, at the end of the chapter the writer recalls for them the fact that it was God and God alone who kept them alive in the desert by providing the manna they so desperately needed. He asks them to remember that God's purpose in all of this was to firmly establish and nurture their reliance on Him so that they would fully realize that their ultimate concern should be obedience (the true bread) to the God who had first called Abraham and established them as the "chosen people".

Remember that these miracle events disclose the true nature of Jesus. John is therefore claiming that Jesus is the one who provides them and us with the true bread of life in the same way that Israel was provided for in the wilderness. He feeds the five thousand not as an end in itself. This miracle is a sign that Jesus himself is the true bread that God supplies. Our deepest spiritual needs are satisfied only when we respond in obedient faith to the one who is the true bread. All other human aspirations are ultimately inadequate to satisfy the inner longings of the human heart. Only faith in Christ is able to establish a relationship with God that leads to the development of the true humanity that God, in Christ, desires for us. Earthly aspirations, though not by definition ungodly, are incapable of recovering

the true humanity that God wants for us. This is a task that God accomplishes only through faith in Christ. Just as God provided the manna necessary for Israel to reach the promise land so God provides Christ as the bread that enables us to reach our true destination.

6:14-15

The crowds, encouraged by their nationalistic feelings that arose every Passover, misunderstand Jesus' true mission that the feeding was intended to reveal. They acknowledge him only as a prophet who would be king and rid them of their oppressors. Jesus, aware of their misguided aspirations, withdraws to the wilderness.