

# THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL FEEDING

## John 6:1-13

8.8.21

### INTRODUCTION

Question: “What is your favorite Bible story?” One of the beauties of the Bible is that it truly has something for everybody — stories about adventure, excitement, romance, good vs. evil, intrigue, betrayal, triumph, tragedy, mystery, history, miracles, poetry, philosophy, and so much more.

Well, today we are going to be talking about what might be the Holy Spirit’s favorite story outside of the events of Holy Week — the feeding of the 5,000. Of course, when talking about the Holy Spirit, declaring something a “favorite” might not be quite right, but why would I even think such a thing? Because the Holy Spirit impressed it on all four of the gospel writers — Matthew, who would have witnessed it directly; Mark, who would have heard about it from Peter (who would have witnessed it directly); Luke, who would have heard about it from Paul, and John, who also would have witnessed it directly. Now while we will be using the first thirteen verses of John 6 as our “anchor text,” we will be harmonizing our telling with generous helpings from Matthew, Mark and Luke.

So, as we tell this wonderful story today, we’ll also be looking at what exactly makes this story so special that the Holy Spirit told it four times! And as we start, **let’s begin with a word of prayer!**

### TEXT (John 6:1-13)

*Sometime after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias) — John 6:1.*

OK; the first thing we need to do is set the stage for what’s happening — and there has been a lot happening. For instance:

- 1) In John 5 (giving us some definition for John’s words, “Sometime after this”), Jesus had made (and rested) His case before the scribes, Pharisees and others about why it was absolutely correct that He calls God “His Father.” As He had told them: ***“[T]he works that the Father has given Me to finish — the very works that I am doing — testify that the Father has sent Me” — Jesus Christ, John 5:36b***, a statement that focused on, among other things, the miracles that He had been doing before so many witnesses. This had become an incredibly difficult problem for the religious leaders — ironic that an amazing work to reflect His Father is about to occur, with an incredible number of witnesses.
- 2) John the Baptist had been killed by King Herod Antipas (the story we shared last week), signaling the extreme lengths that people would go to silence an inconvenient truth. Matthew offers this as one explanation as to why Jesus was going to the east side of the lake: ***When Jesus heard what had happened, He withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place — Matthew 14:13a.***
- 3) The disciples had returned from their ministry. A great amount of physical effort had been used up by them over the course of their work; as Mark tells us: ***The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to Him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, He said to them, “Come with Me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest” - Mark 6:30-31.***

This crossing would have brought Jesus to the east side of the Sea of Galilee (an area we call the Golan Heights today) into a remote wilderness area. That all brings us to this moment in Christ’s ministry.

***[A] great crowd of people followed Him because they saw the signs He had performed by healing the sick — John 6:2.***

Once again, and as always, Jesus had people coming after Him, largely, as John explains, because of the healings He had done; in fact, the structure in the Greek suggests that the crowds “kept following” Jesus because they “continually” saw the signs that He “habitually” performed on those who were sick.

Now keep in mind that Jesus was trying to get both Himself and His disciples away for a time of rest, reflection and refreshment; as Mark describes it: ***[T]hey went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place — Mark 6:32.*** But the people kept coming to Him; in fact, as Mark describes it: ***[M]any who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them — Mark 6:33.*** But despite His fatigue, what was Christ’s response? Mark tells us: ***[H]e had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So He began teaching them many things — Mark 6:34.*** And Luke concurs, adding: ***He welcomed them — how incredibly loving and gracious Jesus was — and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing — Luke 9:11.***

Now back to John 6:2: The Greek word for “signs” used here translates as “miracles,” which John used specifically to mark works that signify divine authority; in other words, what Jesus had been doing was “God-stuff” — powerful works to underscore His authority as the son of God. The unfortunate reality of this moment was that the crowds were following not in a desire to know more about the spiritual healing He was proclaiming as well as the Kingdom He was describing, but rather because of the physical healing He was providing. John himself had reported a moment from early in Christ’s ministry: ***Now while He was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival (the first Passover during His ministry), many people saw the signs He was performing and believed in His name. But Jesus would not entrust Himself to them, for He knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for He knew what was in each person — John 2:23-25.*** Regarding the people that made up this current crowd, nothing much had changed.

***Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with His disciples. The Jewish Passover Festival was near — John 6:3-4.***

Jesus brought His disciples to what basically amounted to an elevated area above a much larger flat area — a plain. And John gave us this Passover information to let his readers know the time of year; this moment that he is going to share about Christ happened in the spring of the year, and about a year before the cross.

So, as we set this moment up, we see that it had already been quite a day, and a long day as well — Jesus engaged in both teaching and healing to a crowd of thousands. And the crowds were remaining. And they were out in the middle of nowhere — the wilderness east of the Sea of Galilee near the village of Bethsaida. And now, things start to get really interesting!

***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?” He asked this only to test him, for He already had in mind what He was going to do — John 6:5-6.***

Jesus had been tending to His disciples, so His eyes were focused on them. But as the crowds approached, He looked up to see what was heading His way. Now, because He already knew what He was going to do, it is likely safe to assume that He knew the physical state that this crowd was in. Jesus addresses the situation in a question to Philip — who, coincidentally, is from Bethsaida: “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” Today we might call this a “pop

quiz,” but, in this moment, Jesus was wanting Philip to see for himself where his faith in Christ truly stood. What did Philip believe, right here, right now, about what Jesus could do with this situation?

***Philip answered Him, “It would take more than half a year’s wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!” — John 6:7.***

So, Philip whips out the old calculator (so to speak) and, after running some numbers, his conclusion is disappointing — but so is his answer to Jesus. He is not looking at the infinite possibilities of Christ’s resources; he is instead only focused on the possibilities of human resources — the polar opposite of where Jesus wants him to be. And the requirements Philip calculates from those human resources are staggering. But just then, another disciples joins the conversation.

***Another of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up, “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?” - John 6:8-9.***

Now Andrew is kind of a cool guy. He’s not mentioned a lot in the gospels, but He seemed to have a knack of using relationships to bring people to Jesus. He was a disciple of John the Baptist before being directed by the Baptist to follow Jesus. After that: ***The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus — John 1:41-42a.*** Now in this instance, he made enough of a connection with this young boy to bring him to Jesus as well — along with a very small bit of food. But Andrew was like Philip in this regard; he only saw the problem: “There are so many, and this is all we got,” while completely overlooking the solution standing right in front of him. And now the conversation started with Philip and Andrew is pick up by the other disciples as well.

***As evening approached, the disciples came to Him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.” Jesus replied, “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat” — Matthew 14:15-16.***

As it’s possible that they had heard every word of these conversations between Jesus, Philip and Andrew, the rest of the disciples joined in. And after seeing the crowd, and ascertaining their needs, their solution appears to reflect compassionate hearts as well: “Send the crowds away so they can go and get something to eat”; Luke even adds that, as late in the day as it was, they may even need lodging as well. But essentially, what they were really saying was, let’s just make the problem disappear. I mean, no people, no problem, right? After all, how could they be responsible for the consequences of a bunch of people coming out into the wilderness with no provisions? I mean, sure they were following after Jesus, but that was no excuse for poor planning.

But then Jesus begins to poke at them, to get them to consider their hearts — not just for any signs of compassion but also for any signs of faith . . . in Him! And the sad irony is that they had just returned to Christ after being out on their own doing His ministry — speaking His words and doing His works by engaging His power, a power that He had graciously given them to use as He had used it. And yet, in virtually no time at all, they are acting and reacting like these last few weeks have never even happened.

***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) — John 6:10.***

It was the custom in those days to only count adult males in any kind of crowd or gathering — sorry, ladies — so that’s the only number we have. But most commentators suggest that, with women and children, this crowd may have been as high as 20,000 people, and maybe even more.

***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 — John 6:11.***

I love the fact that John mentions that Jesus “gave thanks” for the meal of which they were all about to partake; in the Greek, he “expressed gratitude.” If we understand the physical setting for where this was taking place, His voice may have been able to carry quite a bit, so that the whole crowd heard His gratitude. It was a wonderful affirmation that God the Father — His Father — was (and is) the source for all we have. As David had so humbly and beautifully expressed some 10 centuries before this moment: ***“Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name. . . . Lord our God, all this abundance that we have . . . comes from Your hand, and all of it belongs to You” — David, I Chronicles 29:13, 16.*** And then the miracle happened — so quietly as to almost be unnoticed except by those closest to Jesus. He began breaking the bread, and kept breaking, and kept breaking. And then it was the fish that continued to be passed out, and passed out, and passed out. And talk about abundance: John wrote that everyone got “as much as they wanted,” meaning that everybody there that day walked away full — and very satisfied.

***When they had all had enough to eat, He said to His disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.” So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten — John 6:12-13.***

And then Jesus simply instructed His disciples to basically clean up after the crowds left. He wanted no waste, nothing left behind. Amazing when you think that this moment started out with barely enough food for a small boy, and wound up feeding thousands. Twelve baskets were filled up, reminding the nation of Israel of the abundance in spiritual life that was theirs for the taking through the life and ministry of Christ. How incredibly sad that they missed the “feast” that was available right in front of them. And it’s very possible that, as the disciples had been busy serving the food, these “leftovers” became their meal that day.

## **APPLICATION**

Such a rich story. So many lessons — and here are some of them:

First, the continued grace by which Christ both lives and displays His life is astounding. Considering that He knows men’s hearts, meaning He knows where their hearts are at as well as their prime motivations for doing what they do, His grace to continue to pour Himself — His energy as well as His power — into the ministry which He has been given is awesome. The fact is, many of these people clambering for His attention in this moment would in about a year’s time be clammering for His death at any moment. He knew what the outcome was in the lives of all those around Him and, yet, He continued to give of Himself with no limits. As we live in that grace, we are called to reflect that grace, and the amazing consequences that we can know from what we have been given through Christ. Well did Paul write: ***I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way . . . Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift — Paul, I Corinthians 1:4-5a, 7a.***

Ministering grace is what we are called to do, for that is what Christ did. But unlike Jesus, we absolutely don’t have a clue as to the outcomes of our ministries. But when it gets right down to it, knowing the outcome doesn’t really matter. We are not called to know the future; we are called

to be faithful to the present. Which means that, when a ministry opportunity presents itself, we pounce, we go after it — whether filling some role at church or sharing your testimony with a neighbor or whatever it is — and always with the grace by which God has graced us. And we do it, whatever it is, for the glory of God, for the continued glory of His name; in other words, as Paul would say so well: *[W]hatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him — Paul, Colossians 3:17.*

Second, we find a moment in the gospel of Mark where Jesus shared this with His disciples: *“[T]he Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” — Jesus Christ, Mark 10:45.* But we don’t really get the full impact of those words unless we look at them in the context of this story. And the context is an itinerant preacher who, as He seems to be picking up more and more enemies, now finds himself “down one” ally as John the Baptist is murdered by one of the leading authorities in that area. On top of that, He is trying to get away from the massive crowds that have been a part of His every step (or so it seems) so that He and His disciples, freshly back from their first ministry experience, can get some quiet time. He is eager to hear the stories from their recently completed outreach, and to continue to teach and build them as His own time on earth is coming to an end. And He wants them to be able to get some rest. A lot’s been going on, and it would be real nice to be able to catch a breath.

But the perpetual crowds keep finding Him and His disciples. But He doesn’t send them away or hit them with a “Can’t you idiots see we want to be alone?” or, “C’mon guys; give us a break — we’re tired!” Instead, what do the gospels tell us about Christ’s response?

- 1) *He had compassion on them* — which led Him to heal their sick — *Matthew 14:14b.*
- 2) *He had compassion on them* — which led Him to begin *teaching them many things* — *Mark 6:34a.*
- 3) *He welcomed them* — which led Him to speak *to them about the Kingdom of God*, in addition to healing *those who needed healing*— *Luke 9:11b.*

But where the disciples saw only obstacles and objections, Jesus instead saw opportunities in all these people coming His way so, along with the healing, He was going to continue His teaching ministry as well.

The point is that not once did Jesus beg off because of being tired. He was here to serve. He was surrounded by people who needed Him, and what He was offering. This is what He was here for so, tired or not, He stepped right in to meet whatever needs were presented to Him. But He also trusted His Father to provide, as Paul would write some years after Christ’s ministry: *[M]y God will meet all your needs according to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus — Paul, Philippians 4:19.* How often don’t we feel our bodies running out of juice? It obviously happens to all of us. But how often do we pray in that moment for God to meet that need, to give us a boost of energy, or excitement, or whatever, so that we can keep on keeping on? Or are we satisfied to come to the end of our resources and finally just be done? We might be missing out on something extraordinary that God is fully ready to give us the resources for.

You know, in a just a short time, we will be sending out our annual lists of who is available to be nominated for our primary church offices — one elder, one deacon and one deaconess. God has brought all of us into this church family to, among other things, serve one another. These offices are a great opportunity for service. Yes, I know that such things have a time impact on us, and an energy impact on us, but tell me one thing that doesn’t. And “time” is not ours to begin with;

remember what David wrote: *[A]ll the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be — David, Psalm 139:16.* Time is also God’s creation, and His gracious gift to us, that we would use it for Him. And just our being here should be telling us that God isn’t finished with us yet, that He still has things for us to do. So, if you are contacted about your availability for any of these offices, I hope you will prayerfully consider it, and then say “yes” to being nominated. Serving God’s family for God’s kingdom is not a burden; it’s a privilege. So maybe the question, the takeaway, for us should be: Do we believe that God will provide all we need to do all He wants? Do we truly believe that God will give us all we need when we need it?

## CONCLUSION

And the last thing, as we close: It has been said that “little is much when God is in it.” How true that is — and this story is a living, breathing example of that. This little boy originally brought just a little lunch, enough to sustain him until he got home to eat again. Instead, by giving it to Jesus, that individual lunch became a banquet for thousands, who all ate until they were satisfied.

The Scriptures are dotted with this idea: Remember Gideon, who defended Israel against an invader, as God whittled an initial army of 32,000 down to only 300 men. Remember David, a shepherd boy who crushed a giant, experienced warrior with a single stone. Remember Paul describing the early church: *Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before Him — Paul, I Corinthians 1:26-29.*

God can surely do a whole lot with not much. Remember: This is the God who created the entire universe, everything that has ever been made, from nothing. That should excite us no end, to think that the smallest gesture, the briefest word, if given to the Master, can begin a domino that could have an incredible impact for the Kingdom — helping a neighbor bring their groceries into the house, giving somebody a gas coupon at the pump, holding a door for somebody, being gracious to somebody having a bad day. All these random acts of kindness, when done for the glory of God, will be used by Him to plant a seed that He will grow. What a privilege to be a part of that!

We serve an awesome God, who is ready to take our “little lunch” and make it a “banquet of blessing.” What a great way to start a new week — with God expectations of His working through us. So, what are your intentions for this week? Let’s make our intentions be God’s intentions. Let’s never hesitate to give Him our “little lunch,” whatever that may be. In His hands, there’s a banquet waiting for us on the other end. Let’s pray!