

Do Not Fear

John 6:1-21

Imagine that Jesus has posed his test (vv. 5-6) in our congregation. We might expect the trustees to echo Philip's money-management concern, pointing out that the congregation does not take in enough revenue to support such a project. The outreach committee might reinforce Andrew's position, stating that the congregation has earmarked only a small percentage of our income for mission giving and the proposed project's needs far exceed the allocated amount. The evangelism and worship committees may be concerned that we don't have enough brochures and bulletins for the crowd. The property committee may assist with seating everyone on the lawn, although some members might worry about the effects of this event on the property's landscaping. It is likely that none of our boards or committees would expect to participate in a miracle, as that is not what they signed on for. We often serve out of a sense of duty, or because we enjoy the work, or to contribute to a cause larger than ourselves. We identify a few reasonable goals, set some workable plans in motion, and carry out our endeavors with the resources at hand. Our work together is not viewed as a venue for God's glory and mercy to break forth in the world, but as a means to facilitate the congregation's survival as an organization. Our expectations and activities have lost their prophetic edge.

How would our congregation's work together be different if we deliberately shared in Jesus' goal of revealing God's power through each act of ministry? Would we construct our worship and outreach activities differently if pointing to Christ's abundance in response to human hungers

was our ongoing mission? Our scripture suggests that the focus of ministry is not simply what good people decide is reasonable to undertake in order to meet basic needs. Instead, ministry is about multiplying resources so that what might have been a social handout becomes a revelation of amazing grace. Ministry should leave us and other people exclaiming that prophets of transformation are active in the world, bringing hope to souls weary of oppressive social systems and values. **Karen Marie Yust**

In today's reading (6:1-21), we encounter two of the better known—yet too often separated—miracle stories of Jesus: his feeding of the five thousand (vv. 1-15) and his walking on water (vv. 16-21). These stories were important for the early church. Indeed, the feeding narrative is the only miracle story that all four Gospels record, and accounts of Jesus' walking on the sea follow this narrative in all of the Gospels except Luke (see Matt. 14:13-33; Mark 6:35-52; Luke 9:10-17). The inclusion and coupling of these miracles in such diverse traditions ought to give us cause to look more closely at these texts and their relationships. Indeed, for John, these revelatory stories unveil key aspects of Jesus' divine character and purpose.

In the Miracle of the Feeding (vv. 1-15), the setting stands in stark contrast to the preceding account of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem. There, the Jewish leaders sought to kill Jesus because he healed on the Sabbath and called God his Father (5:15-18). Now, on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is called the Sea of Tiberias only here in the Scriptures and serves as no small reminder of earthly rulers and their kingdoms, Jesus faced a different problem: many people were following him because they wanted to see more of his miraculous healing power (vv. 1-4).

Jesus surveyed the crowd, lifted his eyes as from prayer, and spoke with his disciples (vv. 5-9). He asked Philip how they might feed the crowd—a

"test" question showing that Jesus saw more than a crowd of people; he saw their need. Philip also saw their need and had even calculated that more than six months' wages would be necessary to buy bread for everyone just to have a taste. Andrew recognized the emerging problem too and had been among the people, taking inventory of their resources. The only food he had uncovered was a boy's five barley loaves and two dried fish—traveling food of the poor. Andrew then asked the critical question, "What are they among so many?" In other words, how could the tremendous need before them be met by so small an offering?

Jesus took the initiative to feed the hungry (vv. 10-13). The disciples followed his instructions and seated the people in the grass. Jesus then took the boy's offering, blessed it, and distributed it to the crowd. Whether the miracle is a supernatural multiplication of the food or the unleashing of compassion and generosity among the people is not altogether clear. The text is explicit, however, that Jesus caused everyone's hunger to be satisfied and twelve baskets of leftovers were collected (cf. Exod. 16:14f.), indicating the character of this new community where "leftovers"—both food and people—are neither insignificant nor abandoned.

In the aftermath, the people declared that Jesus was "the prophet who is to come into the world" (v. 14) and they wanted to make him king. Jesus, however, withdrew to the mountain by himself (v. 15), distancing himself from their plans to establish their own king and kingdom. They recognized him, but their recognition was at best partial and incomplete.

According to John, this incident occurred during Passover, the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, which celebrated God's deliverance of Israel from captivity in Egypt. God made it possible for the people to share a new life together with God in their midst. John's observance of the time suggests the

exodus as the appropriate lens for viewing the feeding. The people, however, do not fully understand either the significance of the moment or Jesus' identity. They saw in Jesus the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 18:15-18, and they may have connected this feeding to Elisha (2 Kgs. 4:42) and even Elijah (Mal. 4:5), but the significance of this feeding miracle ran deeper. God promised the arrival of a Messiah who would satisfy the people's needs for food and justice (see Pss. 37:19; 81:10, 16; 132:15-17; Ezek. 34:15-16), even as he inaugurated a new exodus into the freedom of God's rule (see Isa. 40:3-11; 49:8-13; etc.). So when the people moved to make Jesus a king rather than worship him as Lord, he slipped away. **Robert A. Bryant**

The feeding of the multitude as portrayed in the Gospel of John also addresses the temptation to shrug our shoulders in the face of human need. We are people who have grown accustomed to facing overwhelming need: Katrina, tsunamis, and on and on. It is easy to look at the sheer magnitude of need and in light of our small resources and ask, "What are they among so many?" It is easy to come to a place to despair. **Cheryl Bridges Johns**

However, Matthew, Mark and John coupled the Miracle of Walking on the Sea (vv. 16-21) with the feeding narrative. Details vary, in Mark, for instance, the disciples do not understand and their hearts were hardened (6:52); in Matthew they worshipped Jesus as the Son of God (14:33); and in John they moved from fear to joy (v. 21). Each Gospel asserts that Jesus joined his disciples on the sea to bestow calm and peace. Jesus also made himself known to his frightened disciples as "I Am" (*(egō) eimi*, v. 20).

But John's fondness for "I Am" sayings suggests that if the disciples do not assign revelatory significance to this identification at the time, they did later. John's account of the disciples' reception of Jesus into the boat, however, is perhaps most revelatory, for John often uses the verb "to receive" (*lambanein*)

in terms of believing that Jesus is the Son of God (see [1:12-13](#); [3:27-36](#); [5:43](#); [7:39](#); [12:48](#); [13:20](#); etc.). For John, such trust and reception on the dark and wind-tossed sea is followed immediately by lack of fear; calm and joy.

Robert A. Bryant

In our "prayers of concern," we place before the Lord the great needs of humanity. We may find echoing back the words, "What do you have?" Whatever we have is not enough. Yet, as this text points out, the "not enough" is not the final answer. When placed in the hands of Jesus, human weakness and limited resources become more than enough.

In 1946, when Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu (Mother Teresa) came face to face with the masses of suffering and dying in Calcutta, she experienced what she called the "call within the call," namely, to serve those suffering the most. Certainly her knowledge or her wealth or her wisdom would not be enough to fulfill a calling to the poorest of the earth. Yet love fueled the passion of her call, and with that passion she began the Missionaries of Charity, a small order of thirteen members. In the ensuing decades, the order grew to thousands of members giving care in many orphanages and charity centers. Love multiplies the meager resources and makes a way forward when knowledge comes to its end.

In 1976, when Millard and Linda Fuller began Habitat for Humanity International, there were few resources and a great need for affordable and decent housing for the working poor. With a few tools and a small group of volunteers, it would have been easy to ask, "What are they among so many?" Yet the passion for justice grounded in the incarnation of Jesus compelled them forward. Today Habitat for Humanity serves as a clear testimony to the multiplying power of God's love. **Cheryl Bridges Johns**

All around us are human need but with few resources. Jesus tells us in this text that we have what we need, if we put it in his hands...and it will be enough! We may feel alone...but he promises always to be with us and will see us until our journey's end. My brothers and sisters, do not be afraid...do not fear!

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