

He Has Done Great Things

John 6:1-21

¹ After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberius. ² A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵ When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" ⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷ Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." ⁸ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹ "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" ¹⁰ Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹ Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." ¹³ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." ¹⁵ When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. ¹⁶ When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, ¹⁷ got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. ¹⁸ The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹ When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. ²⁰ But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." ²¹ Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

Imagine that Jesus has posed his test (vv. 5-6) to us, members of the congregation of Unity Christian Church, Swartz Creek. 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 membership and worship committees may not even offer an opinion, as they are busy preparing for a fast-approaching religious festivals of All Saints Day, Thanksgiving and Advent. The building and grounds committee (that's 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 members or boards or committees would expect to participate in a miracle, as that is not what we 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 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? This story 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 people exclaiming that prophets of transformation are active in the world, bringing hope to souls weary of oppressive social systems and values.

One popular interpretation of verses 9-13 is to explain the abundance of food generated in terms of people's deciding to share hidden stashes of provisions with their neighbors after being shamed by a young boy's willingness to give up his loaves and fish. While such an interpretation may explain what happened, it diminishes the formative potential of the story by downplaying the miraculous aspect. Instead of fostering an exploration of God's ability to act in surprising ways and transform human expectations, the shame-based version of the story focuses on the ability of persons to solve their own problems and justifies shaming as a means of motivating proper human behavior. God is no longer a miracle-worker unbounded by human laws, but a social manipulator who reminds people to share. Behavioral modification replaces amazing grace as the core of the story, and God is reduced to a divine therapist counseling charity among a greedy

people who already know better. Can God not be much more in our lives than an omnipresent social worker reminding us of our duties? **Karen Marie Yust**

We have knowledge of the needs and what is going on in the world and we are often a victim of paralysis instead of empowerment. When faced with crises, famine, AIDS, and other disabling condition, there is the temptation to ask, "In the face of so much, what can we do?" Rather than moving toward action, we are tempted by inertia. The pursuit of trivia is more appealing than the pursuit of answers to problems and solutions to crises.

The Gospel of John is all about knowledge as power. It is about the way, the truth, and the life. It is a knowledge that refuses to be objectified and controlled. It is not a knowledge that entertains or provides a satisfying experience. Rather, it is knowledge of a different kind, one that is expressly relational and deeply passionate. It is a knowledge that grounds the knowing event in the triune life as revealed in the incarnation of Jesus. "In Christian tradition," notes Parker Palmer, "truth is not a concept that 'works' but an incarnation that lives."

The feeding of the multitude as portrayed in the Gospel of John addresses the temptation to shrug our shoulders in the face of human need. It shows the limits of human knowledge and points toward "the incarnation that lives." There was a paralyzing situation...there was overwhelming need and few resources. Surveying the great crowd, Jesus asked a question that tested the limits of the disciples' knowledge: "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?"

When faced with this question, the disciples spoke the despairing truth: "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." Andrew, looking at the meager bread and fish, provided the final resounding rhetorical question: "What are they among so many people?" At the end of knowledge stands Jesus. For the text, the end of human knowledge is the beginning of love's knowledge, and that is enough to feed a multitude with much left over.

Our congregation is filled with people who have grown accustomed to facing overwhelming need: Katrina, tsunamis, currently our relatives are in wildfires in the West and floods in the East, and on and on. It is easy to look at the sheer magnitude of need and in light of small resources ask, "What are they among so many?" It is easy to come to the end of knowledge and in that place to despair.

In the "prayers of the people," 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 finitude 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's knowledge fueled the passion of that 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's knowledge 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 love's knowledge.

All around us are those with knowledge of human need but with few resources. There are countless small congregations, and we are one of them. There are people on limited incomes. There are those with physical or mental handicaps. In the face of it, all these

resources are like a drop in the bucket. Yet, as this passage vividly portrays, in the hands of Jesus, little can become much, the few can become the many, and the weak can become strong.

This text closes with a couple of incidents that give warning to those who wish to control the world or manipulate this power. Jesus' refusal to "be taken" by force and made king and his refusal to allow the disciples to take him into the boat make clear that Jesus is not a concept that "works" for humanity, but an incarnation that lives among us. This incarnation will not be co-opted by human desire, no matter how sincere or lofty the goals. **Cheryl Bridges Johns**

There is a very popular Christian song that praises God for the great or marvelous things God has done. The lyrics say: He has done marvelous things, praise the Lord! You can view the song being performed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHQyAhHPR9Y>. It just reminds us that we don't have to have all the answers to the world's problems, but we can give Jesus our resources and he will do great and marvelous things – to our amazement!

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