

Multiplication!
Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 25, 2003
Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage ~ John 6:4-14

⁴Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵When 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?" ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." ⁸One 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?" ¹⁰Jesus 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. ¹¹Then 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. ¹²When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." ¹³So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴When 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."

Today, we continue a nine-week sermon series on all the symbols in our glorious Rose Window. Our second symbol is that of the loaves and fish.

Just a miracle?

Sometimes a miracle is not just a miracle. Jesus' feeding of thousands with a few fish and loaves of bread is the only miracle story told in all four Gospels. So the question is why did this particular miracle, of all the miracles Jesus performed, hold such power over the early Christians?

John's gospel

Though written from differing perspectives and for varied audiences, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke share much material. Matthew and Luke probably had a copy of Mark's Gospel when they wrote their own. Indeed, the three Gospels are often referred to as the synoptic Gospels, meaning simply "read together," emphasizing some of their similarities. But John's Gospel is quite different. It was the last to be written and shares little material with the other three. For example, almost none of miracles recounted in the synoptic Gospels are found in the Gospel of John and vice versa. John is very clear about why he wrote another Gospel: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31). In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus' miracles are often concrete expressions of God's kingdom. For example, in the kingdom of God there are no blind or lame, so Jesus makes the blind see and the lame walk. But in John's Gospel, Jesus' miracles are signs to his true identity.

More than a miracle

On the surface, this miracle story is pretty simple. A huge crowd has gathered and there is enough food only for a few. Jesus tests his disciples by asking how the crowd will be fed. Typically enough, the



The Loaves and Fish

This symbol in the Rose Window reminds us of Jesus' power and that he is the "bread of life." It also reminds us that each day God provides for our most basic needs. When we pray the Lord's Prayer we ask God for our daily bread. But, perhaps most importantly, this symbol reminds us of our own responsibility to do all we can to multiply the people of God. We are to be the light to the world so that others may see our good works and give glory to God (Matt 5:16).

At St. Andrew, we begin our multiplication by inviting people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and one another. We extend our multiplication through projects like our recent 1000-hour work day and in the loving witness we carry into the communities in which we live and work.

disciples don't have a clue. So Jesus takes the loaves and fish, blesses them, and then distributes them. Miraculously, there is enough to feed fifteen or twenty thousand people. The crowds take the miracle to be a sign that Jesus is the "prophet who is come into the world," the one who can teach in God's name.

But we would be mistaken if we understood this story to be about no more than Jesus' astounding powers. Instead, this is a profoundly rich story that taps into the very core of the Christian faith. There is more going on than we can do justice to in this brief study, but here are a few keys:

- John notes that this miracle happened during Passover, which celebrates the Exodus of Moses and the Israelites from Egypt. Thus, John introduces the theme of the Exodus and God's provision for his people which figures so prominently in this chapter. See the text box on this page.
- Jesus knows what he is going to do to feed the crowds, but he wants to know if Philip, Andrew, and the other of his close disciples know. Have they begun to grasp the source of Jesus' power and, hence, his identity? Evidently not. Rather than understanding that Jesus is about to do something that will reveal God's glory, Philip and Andrew respond with practical concerns about how much it would cost to feed so many. Throughout the Gospel accounts of Jesus life, even his closest disciples have great difficulty truly grasping who it is that they follow.

- John's Gospel was written late in the first century. The Christian community had shared the Lord's Supper, the eucharist¹, for decades. Jesus' taking of the bread, giving thanks, and distributing it is clearly evocative of the sacred meal shared by all Christians.

Manna from God

Jesus' feeding on the hillside was not the first time that God had miraculously fed his people. More than a millennium before, the Israelites had fled slavery in Egypt. Escaping into the Sinai wilderness, the people quickly realized that they did not have enough food. Not surprisingly, some of them complained that it would have been better to die in Egypt than to starve in the desert (see Exodus 16). Hearing the complaints of his people, God, being of grace and mercy, fed them.

One evening, the Israelite camp was covered with quail. The next morning, the ground was covered with a white bread-like substance that the people could simply pick up off the ground and eat. They called it *manna*. Moses told them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat." To teach them that they needed to depend on God daily, the manna would become inedible after a time. Moses instructed them to pick it all up, not leaving any behind. Similarly, Jesus instructed the people "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost."

- Just as Moses instructed the people to pick up all the manna, Jesus makes sure that all the uneaten fragments are gathered up. Truly, God not only provides for our most basic needs (like food) but does so to overflowing!

Jesus - "the bread of life"

After the crowd had been fed, the disciples and Jesus crossed the sea to Capernaum. Of course, the disciples left in a boat. But Jesus walked across the water to join them later (6:16-21)! The crowds went to Capernaum to seek Jesus out, but they could not see past the miracle to the deeper meaning of Jesus' actions. Later in chapter 6, John gives us some of Jesus' most profound teachings about his own significance. Drawing on the multiplication of the loaves, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty (v.35). . . . I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh (v. 51)." Whereas the crowd had been concerned about the fullness of their bellies, Jesus offers them true bread and foresees his own sacrifice on their behalf.

John uses these stories to teach us that a miracle or sign, all by itself, is never really the point . . . it cannot be an adequate basis for our faith. Instead, Jesus calls for us to grasp the deeper and richer significance of his life and his death. Metaphors of bread and manna and water had always pointed to the God of Israel but now they point to God through Jesus. God provides . . . through Jesus; God multiplies . . . through Jesus; God sustains . . . through Jesus; God saves . . . through Jesus. Glory be to God!!

¹ Though in Methodism we don't often use the word "eucharist" to denote the Lord's Supper, it comes from the Greek word *euchariseo* meaning "giving thanks." John uses it in v. 5 when Jesus gives thanks over the loaves.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Exodus 16 God feeds the Israelites in the Sinai Wilderness</p>	<p>Day 2 John 6:1-21 Two miracles that reveal God's glory in Jesus</p>
<p>Day 3 Matthew 14:13-36 Another telling of the two miracles</p>	<p>Day 4 John 6:22-71 Jesus is the bread of life</p>
<p>Day 5 Matthew 6:25-34 God provides, so we need not worry!</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

2003 St. Andrew Summer Lecture Series

This summer, St. Andrew's Center for Christian Learning will again offer a series of three lectures by Scott Engle, the Center's Director. The 90-minute lectures will be at 7pm on the second Tuesdays of June, July, and August: June 10, July 8, and August 12. We'll gather at 6:45 in the new Piro Hall on the garden level. The subjects for the lectures will be *Faith* (June 10), *Hope* (July 8), and *Love* (August 12). By looking at some familiar and not-so-familiar characters from the Bible, we'll seek to understand better how faith, hope, and love are foundational to our lives as disciples of Jesus.

Registration is not required. Childcare will be available by reservation.

For more info go to www.standrewcccl.org.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In this miraculous feeding, Jesus visibly demonstrates that God provides for his people, just as he provided manna in the desert centuries before. What does this say about God's provision for us? Could it mean that we can wait to be fed miraculously, picking food off the ground outside our homes in the morning? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches his disciples that we are not to worry or be anxious about anything! Discuss what you really think is going on here. Why does Jesus say and do these things? How do we apply this "don't worry God will feed us" stuff in our everyday lives?
2. In John's Gospel, there is no breaking of bread and sharing of the cup on the night of Jesus' betrayal and arrest. Instead, Jesus talks about the eating of his flesh and the drinking of his blood here in chapter 6, immediately after he feeds the multitude and walks on water. If we understand that Jesus not only miraculously feeds thousands but is himself "the bread of life . . . the bread from heaven," how might this shape our beliefs about Holy Communion? For example, on the hillside Jesus feeds everyone, including children, not just his closest disciples. What might John be telling us?