

March 14, 2021 Sermon Manuscript

John 6:1-15 (ESV)

¹ After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. ² And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. ³ Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. ⁵ Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” ⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. ⁷ Philip answered him, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough 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 for so many?” ¹⁰ Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. ¹¹ Jesus then 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 And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, “Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.” ¹³ So they gathered them up and

filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten. ¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!”

¹⁵ Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Ephesians 2:4-10 (ESV)

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Faithful Generosity

(Or Becoming a Gifter rather than Hunting for Grifters)

(Jn 6:1-15, Eph 2:4-10)

Last Sunday we took a deeper look at Jesus' cleansing of the temple according to the Gospel of Mark (re-printed in your bulletin).¹ Drawing from the revealing work of Biblical Scholar Obery Hendricks, explored the political, economic, and religious circumstances in first-century Israel. And we examined how the unholy alliance forged between the wealthy priestly class who ran the temple and the occupying Romans led to conditions that were oppressive to the majority of Jews and made life absolutely dire for many. Now, one would expect such brutality from the (beastly) Roman Empire toward the peoples they colonized, but equally as guilty were the priests who were financially abusing their people with predatory lending, while also charging exorbitant prices to fulfill the most basic religious sacrifices required by scripture and even inventing new tithes and offerings that were nowhere in scripture. This was not just financial abuse but spiritual abuse, forcing people to have to choose between either impoverish themselves further or forgoing the sacrifices and living with the shame of feeling unfaithful & unacceptable to God.

¹ Mark 11:15-17 (NIV):

¹⁵ *On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, ¹⁶ and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. ¹⁷ And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”*

Rather than seeing people's physical needs as holy - as God does - the priests in Jesus' day were using the power & privilege they were born into to get their own people both coming & going. And an understanding of this context gives whole new meaning to Jesus' overturning "the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves" (Mk 11:15). And in doing so, Jesus is continuing in the long line of prophets who for centuries had called the priests and wealthy elders of Jerusalem to account, as quoting from Jeremiah he accused them of making the Lord's house into "a den of robbers" (Mk 11:17). #

What determines whether or the extent that we are part of this problem today or part of the solution is whether we trust in worldly power to secure us (both physically and financially) or God. As Jesus taught, we cannot serve God and mammon (the accrual of worldly wealth) because it hinders our capacity to have empathy for the plight of others because we are all in competition. It is only as we find our security more in God that we can become capable of treating all people's needs as holy.

Well, in this morning's gospel passage we heard another well-known story of Jesus' feeding of the 5000. Like Jesus' cleansing of the temple, this story appears in all 4 Gospels, and this morning we read St. John's account. Now we might not typically detect any strong connection between this miracle of the loaves & fishes with what Jesus did in the temple --- this is a passage that has been fully spiritualized by most of the church ----- but to the contrary, this morning I want to suggest that in the Feeding of the 5,000 Jesus is continuing to overturn plenty, and the way John frames it in particular and the details he provides are begging us to see this . Drawing again from Obery Hendricks' insights, we will see how John's telling of this story in particular highlights the way Jesus' actions on the hillside that day were subverting the ways the powerful priestly class had abused God's people and revealed to them that God is so much more gracious and giving than they had been led to believe. ##

The first significant development in this story that is too easily overlooked is found in those first four verses. In the previous chapter, John chapter 5, Jesus had been in Jerusalem. There, he had healed a man who'd been unable to walk for 38 years. But (our passage) opens chapter 6 with Jesus travelling away from Jerusalem to the far side of the Sea of Galilee and a large crowd following. Nothing too surprising, except when we get to verse 4 where John says that "the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand." Well, where were faithful Jews of Galilee *supposed* to be travelling when the feast of Passover was at hand? To Jerusalem. But here we find a "large crowd" following Jesus in *the opposite direction* "because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick" (v2). Now, understand the significance of this: this crowd had been so grateful for the way they'd seen Jesus care for people, that they are rejecting the religious leadership & system of Jerusalem - quite literally walking away from it - and going after this one who treats *their needs* as holy. And little do they know that, rather than the feast of Passover, Jesus will seat them for a feast like they've never experienced before.

Verse 5 says that "Lifting up his eyes", Jesus saw that a large crowd was coming toward him. And His desire is for them to understand that, despite what they've learned and experienced at the temple & from the priests, God actually cares about their needs. But rather than merely teaching this with words, Jesus wants to *show* them. Jesus wants to demonstrate to both his disciples and the crowd that God is more gracious than they ever thought (because some things are better learned through experience), in hopes that this revelation will open their eyes a new way of living.

So as verse 5 continues, Jesus says to Philip, one of his disciples, 'Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?' But John tells us that Jesus asked this strategically, (quote) "to test" Philip. And Hendricks believes that Philip responds the way Jesus knew he would, as Philip points out that they couldn't *possibly afford* to feed this large crowd of people. Philip answers him in verse 7, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little." But with these words Philip has articulated the mindset of the world, which tends to respond to human need with an attitude of

scarcity, if not greed. We are prone to look at our own situation and feel like we barely have enough to care for our own needs, “so how can we possibly care about the needs of anyone else?”

But then Jesus demonstrates how, in the Kingdom of God, when we trust in the Lord to provide for our needs, this frees us up and can give us the vision to see possibilities for how God might meet others’ needs, since we know He cares about them as well. Well, in response to Jesus’ highlighting people’s need for food, suddenly a boy who has five barley loaves & two fish and offers them. And in response to this small act of generosity, Jesus tells his disciples to “have the people sit down.”

Now, it is at this point that a miracle occurs. Verse 11 says, “¹¹ Jesus then 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 And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, “Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.”

But Hendricks notes what a contrast this was to the ideology - dominant not only at the Jerusalem temple, but in the political and economic dynamics of all of Israel - which which was “based on debt”: the peoples’ indebtedness to God for divine favor and the peoples’ indebtedness to the religious authorities for interceding with God on their behalf.

Even the feast of Passover, which was meant to celebrate the Exodus - God liberating his people being exploited and enslaved in Egypt - the priests in Jesus’ day had ironically turned it into an obligation, seeing yet another opportunity to skim from their own people’s meager wages. And if these priests are supposedly representing God, just think about what that communicated to them about who God was: they had re-made GOd into their own image, into a debt collector!

So it’s no wonder that these people had so easily followed Jesus in the other direction, because the feast he offered was a lot better than the Passover going on down in Jerusalem. And in tending to the physical needs of the crowd here in John 6, Jesus is revealing that God is not a debt collector. In Christ, we see God’s posture toward humankind isn’t “you owe me”, but “I love you”; God sees our human needs and wants to meet them. And this fact about God - that he’s a giver, not a debt collector - also seems to be inferred by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, in MATthew 7 on your insert, verse 11,, when JESus says “¹¹ If you, (who) are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!”

And if this is God’s posture toward us, once our hearts grasp and believe that, doesn’t it *have* to transform our posture toward our fellow man? As we said earlier, once we become convinced that God’s foremost desire is to love and provide for us, this frees us from living in fear, and we can move beyond viewing our fellow man as a competitor for limited resources and a threat to our own needs being met.

In light of this, Hendricks has the boldness to wonder if the miracle Jesus works in John 6 was *actually* a divine multiplication of matter **or** if Jesus’ miracle was instead “getting everyone to selflessly and completely share their own little supply with others who’d brought nothing, until everyone’s hunger was sated?” And Hendricks asks this not with the intention of doubting the Jesus’ capacity to work a miracle of matter - creating something from nothing - but rather in recognition that an even greater miracle would be a heart-change among the people in the crowd, from an outlook of fearful scarcity to one of faithful generosity. And we have to at least admit that the scripture isn’t entirely clear about what the precise miracle is.

But however Jesus did it, by providing for this large crowd Jesus demonstrates a new way of living, establishing that the proper basis for interaction between humans is one of giving, of Gift. Jesus shows that the posture that God has always intended for us to have toward others is not “what can i get from them?” but “What can I give to them?”

And I’m afraid to say that all too often as Christians, we miss this part of the gospel entirely. As I said last week, we say we trust in God as our provider, but our actions and what consumes much of our

time and energy says something different. And consequently we view others through a lens of scarcity - calculating and keeping score - rather than through a lens of generosity and love. And when I say this is how we tend to sinfully view others, I'm speaking especially of those beyond the people we're in close relationships, with like our family and friends. Cuz I think many of us *do* probably tend to relate to people of our own family or clan on the basis of gift and generosity - unless we're narcissists who just keep score with everybody. Like Jesus acknowledges in Matthew 7: ⁹ *"Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?"* But when it comes to people outside of our tribe - the immigrant, the muslim, people who look different from us or "identify" different than us - Christians do not have a reputation of charity; we have a reputation of fear, not faith.

What we need to be reminded of, however, is that this is not how God has dealt with us. While He could have been the ultimate debt collector, God instead most generously chose to gift us the payment of our debt by giving his only son.

If you'll look with me for a moment at our passage from Ephesians, just notice how Paul describes what God has done for us. He writes,

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved ...through faith. (down a little) And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand..."

And what's translated "good works" there in the Greek is really just the word "good". God created, and has saved us in Christ Jesus, to do good toward others, even those who are not part of our tribe our clan. But what do we tend to do instead? The further away a person gets from our little circle of those who love us or who are like us, the more likely we are to relate to them on the basis of scarcity rather than generosity, which is sorta like that man in the parable Jesus told in Matthew 18. Y'all remember this? Look with me for a moment on your bulletin insert) at Matthew 18 beginning in verse 23. Jesus said,

²³ "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents (which was a lot of money). ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made (which is how people were used to being treated in Jesus' day). ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii (A tiny little amount compared to what the king had forgiven him), and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt..."

When our attitude toward our others is based upon scarcity and score-keeping, it reveals there are parts of our heart the don't truly believe that God's love and acceptance of us is a gift, that there are parts of us still convinced that somehow we've earned it. There are many believers who are so quick to sniff out a grifter that they totally miss our Kingdom calling to be a gifter to others and trust **God** with our needs.

So in this feeding of the 5,000 Jesus was redefining our relationship both to God and each other as based on gift instead of debt. But Jesus this way of living Jesus was inviting us into was not just an alternative to the way of religion in His day, but also to the way of the Empire.

Hendricks acknowledges what is often ignored: that

- 1) Merely the gathering of 5,000 people in one place without the permission of the Romans was against the law, particularly when they are all gathering for the sake of one man. Specifically “it constituted sedition”, which get this: just so happened to be “a crime punishable by death on the cross”.
- 2) And yet, it wasn’t even just 5,000 people, was it? No, John says it was 5,000 men. And you say, “Okay, what’s the big deal?” Well, you see, five thousand men is not just any random number. No, in those days, five thousand men was the exact size of an army battalion. And you can be darn sure that anyone reading this in John’s day would’ve been well-aware of this.
- 3) And then, combine this with what John tells us in the final verse, that the people were “so moved by the alternative way that Jesus taught and demonstrated that they sought to make him king.” As Hendricks reminds us, a popular uprising seeking to make someone king other than Caesar in Roman territory was just about the most “rebellious act they could have committed in the Roman Empire ~~short of assassinating Caesar.~~”

And though Jesus doesn’t allow them to do this - to make him king - because his kingdom is not of this world, his intention was certainly to gain their allegiance. Jesus’ goal is not to overthrow the kingdoms of this world, but rather for his followers to live within those kingdoms without buying into their false gospel. The false gospel of Empire promises us peace so long as we are willing to step on somebody else in order to attain it. But Jesus wants to help us live in the midst of such worldly kingdoms, while maintaining an allegiance to Him, so he can help us live in a way of faith, not fear; based on loving “others rather than self-centeredness and greed,” and approaching economics with a spirit of cooperation with and consideration for the needs of others “rather than thoughtless competition”, and engaging politics with principles of caring and service, rather than selfishness and corruption. This is why Jesus is neither Republican nor Democrat, and why He refuses to fit neatly into our worldly categories of liberal or conservative. And it’s why he refused to let them make him into a worldly king.

The Feeding of the 5,000 was an invitation to them *and to us* to trust that the Lord cares about our needs, so we can begin to care about the needs of others, and move beyond these tribalistic categories and more fully into the kingdom way of living. And so as we receive holy Communion this morning - albeit in a plastic baggy, but it’s holy communion nonetheless - may this approach this action of receiving Jesus as a prayer that he might soften our hearts and heal us of attitudes of fear & scarcity and fill us with greater faith, so that we might be given hearts of generosity and begin to treat the needs of our fellow human beings as holy; however different they may be from us.

In the Name of the Father and the son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

