

Pastor's Message – 7/28/24  
John 6:1-13

Some of you are aware that I had to get a new car last September – my previous vehicle required more repairs than the car was worth. I wasn't prepared to purchase a new vehicle, but I've had it now for almost 11 months and I took it in for its first service this past week. I'm still learning about my 2023 Trailblazer and there is a lot to learn compared to my previous 2011 Subaru Forester and even more to learn than my previous 2001 Chevy Tracker and my 1991 Geo Tracker.

As I learn about the features of this modern vehicle and reflect on our Bible passage for today, I remember some of those ancient features on my previous vehicles.

Some of you might remember the digital mileage displays of older vehicles. The odometer, back then, was a mechanical device: a row of number-wheels. When that last little "9" on the right side of the display began to roll over, and we saw the whole row of nines begin to lift up, then all at once transform themselves into zeros, we felt like we'd witnessed something of great importance. I can remember looking forward to seeing those numbers change.

If, on the other hand, it happened that we forgot to look at the odometer at that critical moment — and missed the big rollover — we felt cheated somehow.

We all know, on an intellectual level, there's no difference between our car at mile 99,999 and mile 100,001. When the odometer rolls over, the fan belt doesn't suddenly break. The tailpipe doesn't commence belching black smoke. The doors don't fall off.

But somehow, it feels different to ride in that car, post-100,000. That's the strange power, the pull, numbers can exert over and on us.

As human beings, we love our numbers. Especially round numbers. For most people, 5,000 is *much* more appealing than 4,999.

For those of you who wear them, think of your fitness tracker. You look at it in the evening and see that you have walked 9,874 steps. So, what are you going to do? I've done it. You walk around the house, get 126 more steps, and feel the sublime satisfaction of 10,000-step perfection.

A baseball player with a batting average of .298 is going to work extra hard so that he can hit .300, just like the high school student who is determined to get a 1200 on the SAT.

Round numbers are appealing to us. They say something about quality.

Not quantity ... *quality*.

I mentioned last week that we have moved from focusing on Paul's 2<sup>nd</sup> Letter to the Corinthians during our Sunday worship services into consideration of the gospels, last Sunday, one week of Mark, and now into John. In fact, this is the beginning of five weeks of sermons built around the sixth chapter of John. I've been watching it for a number of years now and have been hesitant. It's pretty daunting. And boring, maybe. Granted, John's gospel is multi-layered. John's Greek is simple but always subtle. But there's stuff there that's worth digging into.

There are some key words early on in this passage. The crowd is following Jesus because they saw the signs. John's gospel is big on signs. The miracles are signs. And signs point to something. As I thought about these 5 weeks of Sunday a couple months ago, I wondered if it might be meaningful for us to celebrate Communion every Sunday. Some believe that the bread that we break and the grape juice that we drink are somehow the real body and blood of Jesus. Others believe they are signs of Jesus' presence among us. The feeding of the multitude is one of the very few incidents in Jesus' life that appears in all four gospels, so there are obviously some important things for us to pay attention to.

One thing that our gospel reading today reminds us of is the contrast between human need and inadequacy. From his vantage point on the mountain, Jesus "looked up and saw a huge crowd coming to look for him" (v. 5). Having now become aware of the enormous crowd, Jesus directs a question to Philip: "Where can we buy bread to feed all these people?" Philip has no answer.

However, Andrew has a suggestion. He says to Jesus, "There is a young boy here with five barley loaves and two fish." Here we get into some of the subtlety of John's Greek in his use of "boy" and "fish." For John, literally, it is not just a "boy" with two "fish," but a "*little* boy" with two "*small* fish." You can almost hear the defeatist tone in Andrew's voice as he asks, "But what good is that with this huge crowd?"

Notice that Jesus did not feed 4,999 people on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. No, according to John, "The men alone numbered about 5,000." (6:10). This is the only miracle that appears in all four gospels, so you know that it is critically important. But even so, the exact number of diners is a little fuzzy. Matthew says that "those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children" (14:21). The total number of people could easily have been double or triple the number of men ... 10,000 or even 15,000.

Both of which are nice, round numbers.

Round numbers communicate quality.

But even though the exact number who ate the loaves and the fishes is uncertain, all of the gospels make clear that this miracle is the feeding of the 5,000. This round number signals quality, not a cut-rate discount. The feeding of the 5,000 shows the abundance of God's care for us, and God's desire to give us nothing less than the bread of life.

It's a quality miracle.

For starters, the feeding is a miracle of abundance. When a large crowd comes marching toward Jesus and the disciples, Jesus tests Philip. He asks the disciple, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" Philip begins to panic and stammers, "Even if we worked for months, we wouldn't have enough money to feed them (John 6:5-7)!"

Philip is feeling the scarcity of their resources and the enormity of the need. He makes the same mistake that so many churches make today, saying, "We don't have the budget; we don't have the staff; we don't have the equipment or the time or the energy."

Jesus just shakes his head. He knows very well what he is going to do. But he is testing his disciples, trying to break them out of the scarcity mentality.

It's a miracle. Miracle stories remind us that God can do the impossible – no matter how we interpret them. We could take the story literally. A small boy shares his lunch, Jesus blesses it, and it multiplies into enough to feed all the people. In fact, it multiplies so much that there are more leftovers than there was food in the basket to begin with. Or let's look at the miracle another way. Let's say most of the people had brought a little something to eat. When they see the generosity of the young boy, they put a little of their lunch in the baskets as they are being passed. Those without any, take food, but those with a little more than they need, put food into the basket. So generous are the people that there is more than they began with.

People are looking for miracles – looking for answers and solutions to their own personal problems and the problems of the world. Looking deeper, we can see that the feeding of the 5,000 reveals God's desire to give us the bread of life. The quality of this miracle is seen in its abundance, yes, but also in its gift of Jesus. "I am the bread of life," Jesus says just a little later in the gospel of John. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry" (v. 35). Jesus wants our physical hunger to be satisfied, but also our spiritual hunger.

His focus is quality, not quantity. Feeding the whole person, not just filling a stomach. Jesus is not just bread, but the bread of life!

So, what are you looking for? What are you hungering for?

If you're looking for a Jesus who will fatten your 401(k), guarantee a cure for your cancer, offer you "10 easy steps to a perfect family," land you a great job, restore or repair each and every one of your relationships, then you've got the wrong Jesus. There are plenty of Jesus' people who can help with such things, and indeed the Scriptures offer plenty of guidance on such things. But Jesus himself has different things to tend to.

Jesus didn't come to perfect *your* life; he came to lay down *his* life and take it back up again, as he himself said (John 10:18). His death and resurrection, then, are a "meal" that sustains our souls, bringing wholeness, healing and growth. When we come **to** Jesus, and **for** Jesus, we receive Jesus.

When our souls are fed and filled by the work of Jesus, we may still go through seasons of illness, unemployment or even a lack of food. But one thing we will never, ever be is — empty.

Furthermore, when we fill ourselves with Jesus, we find that many of our other cravings in life, such as a need for purpose and meaning, become satisfied, freeing us to view the issues that affect our day-to-day lives with contented eyes and an eternal perspective.

So, one last time: *What are you hungry for?* It's a great question. It's a question that goes beyond what you do to quench a midday craving. It's a question that — if you allow it — tugs at much deeper drives and desires. In the words of the prophet Isaiah: *Why spend your money on food that does not give you strength? Why pay for food that does you no good? Listen to me, and you will eat what is good. You will enjoy the finest food.* (Isaiah 55:2 NLT).

This miracle story today, the feeding of the 5,000, reveals God's love and God's desire. In this miracle story, the abundance of God is clear. Either God provides the plenty or the faithful do so. In any case the focus is on abundance, rather than the "scarcity" attitude the disciples had at the beginning of the story. Where is your heart and mind focused — on scarcity or on abundance? What might happen if we all celebrated the abundance of God and shared our abundance with others? The world would change!

As we receive the Food that offers true sustenance for our souls, we follow Jesus not so that he can meet our needs but rather knowing that he is all we need. As we receive the Food that offers true sustenance, our baskets overflow enough that others receive that same Food.