

“Not Just What, But How”

Based on John 6:1-21

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I'm sure you know that the four gospels have different stories told in different ways. Mark is the shortest gospel and is told in a hurry, often with the barest of details. Matthew relies heavily on Mark, taking most of his stories and expanding them. Luke has lots of the same stories but there are a few that are only found in Luke, including the story of the good Samaritan. John is full of stories that you only find in his gospel.

All of them of course retell the story of Jesus's passion, crucifixion and resurrection. There are different details. But the progression of the story is the same. You have the same cast of characters. It makes sense that these stories would be in all four of the gospels since this is at the heart of the gospel. Jesus died to defeat the power of death so that we have the promise of experiencing eternal life. It is in John's gospel that we have that summary verse, the gospel in a nutshell, “for God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.”

However, there is only one miracle story that all four gospels tell, and two of the gospels tell this story twice. It is the story of the miraculous feeding of the crowd. All four gospels have the feeding of the 5000. Mark and John also have a second telling of the same basic miracle in which 4000 are fed. So this miracle of taking a little food and multiplying it to feed a huge crowd is told six times in the gospels. I wonder why this particular miracle story is so important.

Maybe because it suggests a prophecy in Isaiah 25:6, “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.” It's a vision of the future reign of God over the earth ushered in by the messiah. So when Jesus performed this miracle, he is demonstrating a foretaste of this promise, suggesting that he is the messiah who is bringing to reality the promise of God's reign over the earth. This is why the people rush forward to make Jesus their king. The

crowd is thinking, “It’s happening! Our deliverance from the oppression of Rome has come! God’s kingdom is being restored!” And as we read, the disciples apparently form a human chain to hold the crowd back as Jesus alone runs back up to the top of the mountain. No one will be crowned king today. The kingdom of God is not a political arrangement on par with the other nations of the earth. As Jesus says in his trial, “My kingdom is not of this world.”

This could be one of the meanings of the miracle story but it doesn’t have to be the only one. The stories of Jesus we encounter in the gospels can have multiple meanings. John’s tellings in particular encourage multiple meanings. This is one reason why the Bible is precious. Not only do we believe that it is the Word of God, but that there are so many meanings in the biblical stories. We can read and meditate on these stories for years and still find new meanings that apply to our lives in different ways.

I suggest that this story demonstrates how Jesus provides for just what is needed in the moment. Whether he was engaging one-on-one or with a large group, whatever their immediate need was, Jesus would respond to meet that need. This basic fact is one reason why crowds were drawn to Jesus. In this particular story we are told that the crowd was following Jesus “because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick.” Sick people needed healing. They didn’t need a lecture, or a comedy routine to distract them from their pain, or platitudes about pie in the sky. The immediate need was healing from their sickness and Jesus did that.

For anyone who is a business entrepreneur this makes perfect sense. If you are trying to start a new business, first you study a particular market area and identify a problem. Next, you come up with a solution. Next, you sell to the market your solution to their problem. That’s the pathway to success in business, offering a solution to a problem, meeting an immediate need of the customer. I am not saying Jesus was a business man. But he is addressing something fundamental to what it means to be human. We all have problems that need solved, needs that need addressed. And when we find someone who can meet our needs, we are drawn to them, we find them to be valuable to us. We

might even consider them to be our saviors. Well, Jesus is that and more because over and over Jesus identified what people needed and provided it for them, except he did it free of charge. That made him very popular; that is until he started making demands on those who would be his disciples. John notes in 6:66, “because of this [the things Jesus was teaching] many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” Jesus knew what it was like to be unpopular.

As Jesus saw the crowd follow him and the disciples up the mountain, he asks Phillip where he and the disciples can go to buy bread to feed all these people. Why does Jesus assume they are hungry? Here’s a larger question: why were all these people out here? Didn’t they have somewhere to be? It’s true, all those people may have had the freedom to take a day or two off from their jobs to go follow Jesus out into the wilderness. But is it possible that all these people didn’t have a job? What if the majority of these people were jobless, landless, homeless? It’s just something to consider, how it is that this massive crowd of people had the opportunity to go follow Jesus around instead of working some job or having other responsibilities that kept them closer to home.

Whatever is the backstory of this crowd, Jesus knew that their immediate need was food and Jesus was determined to feed them. But notice how Jesus goes about this. The feeding of the crowd was not going to be an assembly line approach where the people stand in line, file past the food table to pick up their tray, and then go find some place to sit. They won’t line up to be handed a sack lunch and then head for home. No, Jesus has the crowd sit down on the grass. The food will be brought to them. The crowd will be served as if they are at a banquet.

What does this say about the dignity Jesus extended to this crowd? If we assume that this is a crowd who had the opportunity to follow Jesus out into the wilderness because they were poor, jobless, perhaps landless, to have the privilege of lounging on the ground and being waited on would be a real blessing. I am thinking of past experiences I have had feeding the homeless. I think every time I have done it, we bring the food in and set it up. The people walk through, telling us what they want on their tray, then they take their tray of food and go sit somewhere. But then there is this restaurant that was started by Jon Bon

Jovi called Soul Kitchen. It is a nice restaurant with linen table cloths, a nice table setting, real forks and knives, you get the picture. And the homeless or those who are enduring grueling poverty order off a menu. You pay what you can. You also have the option of pitching in to pay off your meal. The whole idea is to extend a greater sense of dignity toward folk who are going through tough times. And that's what Jesus is doing for this crowd. Not only will they be fed with as much food as they want, but they will be served. And there will be more than enough. If dessert would have been offered the people would have said, "Sorry, I'm stuffed."

Imagine you were one of them, that every time you saw a barley loaf you remembered this experience. Barley is an inferior grain for bread. I've never had barley bread, have you? It would have been a more common staple among the poor in those days who couldn't afford wheat bread. But after what happened on that mountain that day, I wonder from then on, whenever you took a barley loaf, broke it and ate it, that memories of that day when you had a banquet in the open air, would come back to you. That simple loaf of barley bread became for you a symbol of a miracle.

Imagine what your next meal was like, with the memories of that banquet fresh in your mind. I bet before you ate you offered a prayer of gratitude. You probably ate your meal with a joyful heart. Perhaps the simple food you were eating tasted just a little better.

For the crowd gathered on the mountain, the menu was bread and fish. They were hungry, and Jesus met their immediate need. But this banquet would remain imprinted in their memory the rest of their days. The way Jesus orchestrated this miraculous banquet in the open air was a transformational experience for those blessed to participate in it that surely generated a feeling of gratitude, so much so that the crowd was prepared to make Jesus their king by force. The miraculous multiplication of the bread and fish aside, it was the way the people were fed that is so powerful. Not only were their bellies filled, their need for recognition, for respect, for dignity, Jesus met that need as well. Jesus didn't meet needs in a patronizing way but with respect toward the one he was addressing. I wouldn't be surprised that while the people were

eating that Jesus was mingling, going from group to group, and having some great dinner conversations.

Can something like this happen in the ordinary times of our lives? I know it's extremely unlikely that any of us will experience a small amount of food multiplying to fill the bellies of five thousand people. But in a broader sense, can't we also, like Jesus modeled for us, meet the immediate needs of others and do it in a way that honors and dignifies the recipient of our aid?

Recently, a police officer was caught on camera doing a good deed. He was outside a carry-out giving a homeless man a shave with an electric razor. The backstory was that this man saw a McDonalds with a sign that they were hiring. So he went in to apply. The manager said that if he could get cleaned up, including shaving off his beard, that he would be hired. Well he was having trouble getting his razor to work. So he came up to this officer and asked him if he could help him out. So he did. He got him some fresh batteries and shaved him right there in the parking lot. They both then walked over to the McDonalds and the guy was hired. He's still working there and getting himself set up so he can have his own place and no longer have to live on the streets. It was a simple act, one person helping another in a practical way, but it made a big difference in this man's life.

When Jesus asked Phillip where to buy enough bread, Phillip basically said, "Nowhere." Andrew pointed to the boy with the bread and fish and said, "This boy has some food, but what good is it among so many people?" The disciples were making a logical observation. Observing this huge crowd of hungry people and considering their own resources, the need was overwhelming. What could they do with so little resources? And as we consider the needs of people who live all around us in our community and consider our own resources individually and as a church, the need is overwhelming. What can we do with so little? We can easily relate with Phillip and Andrew.

But the lesson here is to start with what you have to meet the immediate need of one person: even if it's as simple as buying them a tank of gas, getting them a sandwich, or giving them some of your time and a listening ear, or a shoulder to cry on. Following Jesus as our

model, start by meeting the need of another, treating them with dignity and respect. And then see what happens next. Who knows? That person you helped may remember that moment when you were there for them. It might be a turning point in their life. You may never see that person again, but for the rest of their days they will never forget that moment. They may even offer up a quick prayer of thanks for you, the way you treated them and helped them. And God will smile.