

7-26-09 sermon More Than We Want John 6:1-21

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There is always something more to learn from Jesus ... sometimes it is something we have learned before that gets applied in a whole new dimension of our lives; sometimes it is something we simply haven't paid attention to before. Sometimes it is *more* than we want.

This week I have thought about these two stories from John chapter 6 in a whole new way – the two stories we just heard read about Jesus feeding the 5000 and about Jesus coming to the disciples in the midst of the storm on the sea. I had never really thought about the fact that they are told back to back in the Gospels. You know how we are always saying that people should not take something out of context, should pay attention to the context in which something is placed ... well, that applies here. The two stories belong together.

Usually I would think about preaching on one or the other of the two stories, but the lectionary – the listing of scriptures week by week that are recommended for Christian preachers around the world – suggest preaching on them together. On the back of the bulletin cover you will see that this is the Gospel reading for this Sunday. Our denominational bulletin covers are based on the lectionary, the 3-year cycle of scripture readings that help preachers cover the wide scope of scriptures, so as not to get hung up on their favorite hobby horses when they preach.

As I studied these scriptures I discovered that they are almost the only two stories about Jesus recorded in John that are also told in the other Gospels. Except for calling the disciples and going to the cross and being raised from the dead, these are quite nearly the only stories about Jesus that John's Gospel records the same as the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke – which often tell the same stories; it is John who usually has different stories to tell). The story of feeding the 5000 is told in all four of the Gospels and in all but Luke, it is followed immediately by the story of Jesus walking on water. That's fairly significant. So we do well to see what these two stories have in common and how they interrelate as stories that belong together.

What strikes me (and also the commentaries I studied – it is always good to first read the scripture and pay attention to what you hear the Lord saying through the scripture, and then check with what biblical scholars have written in commentaries to

make sure you're not too far off the beaten track) ... what strikes me and others about these two stories is that they both talk about how Jesus is *more* than we want. Jesus provides more than we need.

Consider the first story – a very familiar Bible story: Jesus is teaching the disciples when a great crowd gathers. “*How shall we buy bread for these people to eat?*” he asks his disciple Philip. “*Eight months wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have [so much as a single] bite!*” Philip replies. And yet when Philip’s brother Andrew (another of Jesus’ disciples) brings a little boy with five little loaves and five little fish [and the Greek words for all of these are diminutives – clearly all are “little”], Jesus gives thanks [a key action – Jesus invites God to do with the little they have whatever God wants to do] ... and then the disciples distribute to the people “*as much as they wanted*” and “*they all had enough to eat*” and gathered up the left-overs, filling twelve baskets with pieces of bread. Even children remember this story.

I am tempted to comment – so I will – that this story teaches us that there should be some left-overs after a meal. It goes completely against the grain of all of our German-American grandmothers who insinuated that they would be insulted if we didn’t lick the platter clean. But it may be worth considering again. I read this week that studies have been carried out to discover why the French with all of their fatty foods and multiple course dinners are generally slimmer than Americans. The answer given is that the French stop eating when their stomachs are satisfied, while Americans don’t stop until the plate is empty.

The people Jesus fed quite evidently stopped eating when they “*had enough to eat*” and the disciples gathered up the left-overs. Quite obviously, Jesus was able to satisfy their physical hunger. He took what little they had, and made it *more* than they wanted. John’s Gospel goes on (after the story about walking on water) to teach that Jesus is the Bread of Life who satisfies spiritual hungers forever. He gives us *more* than we know to ask for. Jesus gives us more than we want.

The people are amazed by this miraculous sign. This is just what they are looking for – a genie who does not even need an incantation to come out of his bottle and does not need to be prompted by our asking for what we need. This is One who knows our needs before we know them and sets to work to satisfy our hungers and give us *more* than we want. Isn’t that what everybody is looking for? Something/ someone who will satisfy our needs. The people fed by Jesus begin to say, “*Surely*

this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.” And when Jesus sees that they intend to make him king by force, he withdraws *“to a mountain by himself.”* Even the disciples don’t seem to know where he has gone. They get into their boats – they are, after all, fishermen by trade, who work their open sea in the night to catch fish – and they set off across the waters.

A strong wind starts blowing and the waters grow rough. They *row* their boat for 25 or 30 stadia, 3-3½ miles, verse 19 says. Why? Are they being blown away from their destination? Probably – Mark’s Gospel says that while on the mountain, Jesus could see *“the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them.”* It was quite a storm. We often think the disciples were afraid of the storm. But all three Gospels that tell this story clearly say that what frightened the disciples was *not* the storm – rather what frightened them was *Jesus ... “approaching the boat, walking on the water.” “They were terrified.”* Not of the storm. Mark’s Gospel makes clear: *“they thought he was a ghost.”* They are terrified to see that someone is out walking on the water in the midst of the storm, coming towards them! That is more than they ever wanted to experience!

And Jesus knows what’s going on in them. Notice that Jesus does not say to them, “do not be afraid of the storm.” No, in Matthew chapter 14 and Mark chapter 6, just as in John chapter 6, Jesus says to the terrified disciples, *“It is I; don’t be afraid.”*

It is as if Jesus knows this is *“more Jesus”* than we want. This is no longer merely good friend Jesus, not just a wise teacher, not just a brother in the human family who knows how to care for our human needs. No, this is the awesome Son of God who appears among us in the midst of terrifying storms, such that the disciples are more afraid of him than of the storm itself.

We tend to prefer the Jesus who provides for our *earthly* hungers. We don’t always do well with the Jesus who opens our eyes to awesome, uncharted dimensions of creation. We prefer the love of God to the fear of God. But the fact that the Gospels put these two stories side by side tells us that *we don’t get one without the other.* Reverence, awe, and fear of God are an appropriate response to the true and full reality of Jesus, for all who have eyes to see and ears to hear. Jesus is indeed *more* than we want.

Matthew's Gospel (Mt. 14:32-33) says that when Jesus got into the boat, *"the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'"* Mark's Gospel (Mk. 6:51-52) says, *"the wind died down. They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened."*

Now I don't think that means that they were opposed to Jesus, deliberately hardening their hearts. They simply had seen Jesus every day and had gotten used to him as a human companion. When he fed the 5000, it seemed like a gracious, compassionate thing to do – something that any good human being would want to do, if he could. They simply had not understood that the only reason that five little loaves and two little fish could satisfy everyone's hunger was because he truly is the awesome Son of God who takes the world by storm.

It is a fearsome thing to realize that Jesus is not our nice nanny, not our errand boy sent to do what we want him to do, but rather that Jesus is God's Son, sent to do what God wants him to do: sent to repair this broken Creation, to confront us and turn us inside out if necessary in order to make us right again. That is what we need. It is often *more* than we want.

We live in a generation when everyone seems to want the Lord to meet our needs. Church conferences teach us to find the itches of our neighborhoods and scratch them, to invite people to come and have their needs met by the church. Little wonder that people sometimes leave saying things a jilted lover might hear about how "you just don't satisfy me any more." As if it is all about us.

The placing of these two stories together in the Gospel should make clear to us that it is not all about us – it is all about the God who made us and who wants to redeem us so that we might be made ready for life eternal, not just for life in this world.

We are tempted to see Jesus as a *"buffet of blessings,"* as one commentary says, as someone simply available to meet our needs and make our troubles melt away. Eugene Peterson (the one who wrote the paraphrase of the Bible called *"The Message"*) writes about this passage: *"In a consumeristic culture, if we are not careful, we transform Jesus into just another secular therapist and the church becomes reduced to just another means to get what we want before we allow Jesus to use us to get what he wants. In our efforts to reach out to the world in evangelism,*

we end up offering the world the same thing it could acquire elsewhere. ... The operating biblical metaphor regarding worship is sacrifice. But this is not the American way. The major American innovation in the congregation is to turn it into a consumer enterprise. ... We have a huge advertising industry designed to stir up appetites we didn't even know that we had. We are insatiable. ... If we have a nation of consumers, obviously the quickest and most effective way to get them into our churches is to identify what they want and offer it to them. Satisfy their fantasies, promise them the moon, recast the gospel in consumer terms – entertainment, satisfaction, excitement and adventure, problem-solving, whatever. We are the world's champion consumers, so why shouldn't we have state-of-the-art consumer churches? (Eugene H. Peterson, "Transparent Lives," *Christian Century*, November 29, 2003, p. 24, quoted in *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 37, No. 3, pp. 19-20)

It can be dangerous to give people the Jesus who is *more* than they want.

William Willimon (*Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 37, No. 3, p. 19) tells about an annual retreat of a congregational council that was evaluating and planning for ministries of the church. There was great satisfaction in the many ministries of the congregation that cared for needs in the community and among the members. Then someone said, *"I have a matter of new business. I would like for us to approve this resolution condemning the war in Iraq."* The whole council shuddered. *"A fierce, unwanted debate followed."* Some said, *"with all the good we're doing in the name of Christ, and all the good feeling around the table, it seems such a shame to spoil it with this controversy."* *"But I'm presenting this in the name of Jesus,"* said the person who presented the war resolution. *"I really believe that the church should speak out."*

Sometimes Jesus calls us to *more* than we want to deal with. Jesus comes in the midst of storms, when we're rowing against the wind for all we're worth. And Jesus can frighten us – especially when he seems quite at home walking on stormy waves and inviting us (like Peter in Matthew's Gospel) to step out of our boats and walk on the water with him. When we sing that we want to *"walk with the Lord in the light of his Word,"* we often forget that his Word says (Psalm 29), *"the God of glory thunders, The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; The voice of the Lord strikes with flashes of lightning. ... The voice of the Lord shakes the desert; The voice of the Lord twists the oaks and strips the forests bare. And in his temple all cry, 'Glory!'"*

It can be wonderful to experience the power of God. Especially in a time of increasing scarcity, when people are losing their jobs and resources seem to be diminishing, we cling to the Good News of an awesome Jesus who can make five little loaves and two little fish enough to satisfy the hungers of five thousand people, with left-overs, no less!

But we dare not separate that Good News from the awesome awareness that Jesus also comes in the midst of storms, to let us know who he truly and most fully is – the Son of God who expects us to overcome our fears and take him fully into our boats. More than simply asking Jesus what he can do for us, we have to ask what Jesus wants to do to us, in us, through us.

Remember Jesus' words in the midst of the storm at sea: *"It is I; don't be afraid."* And remember, that when they *"were willing to take him into [their] boat, ... immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading."* Jesus will get us where we need to be, when we fully receive his awesome, unearthly presence.

Even when Jesus is *more* than we want, let us praise him, fully receive him, and allow him to work in us as he knows God wants done. Then all of our hungers will be satisfied. And the hungers of all of God's creation can be met. And we shall truly be God's people ... in this world and in the world that is to come.

Hymn: "Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing" (a lively tune – Lyngham -- #81)

Benediction: Ephesians 3:20-21

*Now unto him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!
Amen.*