

It is more profitable to know Jesus than to know about Him.

Weekly Edition – September 29, 2017
Gospel According to St. John – Second Year

Jesus Feeds Five Thousand (Part 1)

6 Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), ² and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick. ³ Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. ⁴ The Jewish Passover Festival was near.

⁵ When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" ⁶ He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

⁷ Philip answered him, "It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"

⁸ Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, ⁹ "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"

¹⁰ Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

¹² When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." ¹³ So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

¹⁴ After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." ¹⁵ Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

The Gospel of St. John

Part I

- Prologue 1:1-14
- First Year 1:15 – 2:22
- Second Year 2:23 – 6:71
- Third Year 7:1 – 12:50

Part II

- The Last Discourse 13:1 – 17:26
- The Arrest and Trial 18:1 – 19:16
- Death and Resurrection 19:16 (b) – 21:25

Entering into Scripture: A Meditation on the Feeding of Five Thousand

Red. Yellow. Violet. White. Pink. The splash of color jolts me back to the present moment. It makes me smile. Stretching out in every direction – a gorgeous and vibrant wildflower carpet – lupins, buttercups, daisies. Happy little desert blossoms extending out as far as the eyes can see. They are set against a sea of green grasses – those springtime hues that are so bright and deep they hurt your eyes. You only see it this time

of year, before the green is bleached by the desert sun.

It is late morning. We are all together – the twelve, that is. All of us and Jesus. We walk with purpose, but with no aim – at least no aim of which I am aware. That is how it is, with Jesus. I am never quite sure what each day will bring.

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The beauty around us is beyond words. This colorful meadow gently cascades down to the waters edge. The Sea of Galilee has a life of its own, its passing moods marked by different tones. Today's is cobalt: Restful. Joyous. It is the perfect spring day.

Moments ago I was lost in my thoughts. I didn't really take notice of the sights, the smells, the crisp spring air. Instead my thoughts were somewhere else. The waxing Paschal moon always triggers it for me – announcing Passover is near at hand. I dread the chaos in Jerusalem during these festivals, a dread that has grown more intense with the rising hostility of the Pharisees toward Jesus. Even so, the anxiety of moments ago has evaporated – much like the morning fog lifts from the sea. It will come back again, but not now. Not today. All that seems so distant out here, snuggled in by the beauty of God's creation.

For a moment, I had forgotten them. Only steps behind is a throng from the nearby villages. We can go nowhere without them. They are everywhere. Wherever we go, they follow. You can spot us from across the Sea. Just locate the crowd. "X" marks the spot. It beacons "Jesus is here!"

I have mixed feelings about them. They seem so lost, so rudderless. I feel sorry for them. It is as if they want something from Jesus, but can't quite put their finger on it; can't name it. Whatever it is, they cannot get enough of Him. But they annoy me too. Jesus puts on quite a show – even a spectacle at times. Never know what today will bring. For many it seems like nothing but cheap entertainment; a freak show.

As His popularity grows, so do the crowds. Everywhere we go people are talking about Him. The healing of that invalid back in Jerusalem has been widely circulated. So too the healing of a leaper. The man with a withered hand. Even a whole herd of pigs rushing headlong into the Sea and drowning. And that's just a teaser. I have lost track of the miracles I have witnessed. All of Israel is abuzz on account of Him.

The meadow's far side sweeps up to an elevated perch. Jesus walks up and stops. He turns around and gazes out upon the throng. There are thousands of them today. The column must stretch back a mile – all the way back to the Jordan river ford. The sheer numbers are, no doubt, in some way amplified by the pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem for Passover. Like all good Jews, they would avoid Samaria by detouring around the Sea, and that would bring them through this meadow.

I scan the horizon from right to left – taking it all in: the beauty of the distant hillsides, the column of people on the carpeted meadow, the restful Sea, and finally the village of Bethsaida. Two miles down shore, it is the hometown of brothers Peter and Andrew and our friend Phillip. It is now about one o'clock. Slowly the pilgrims close-rank, filling in the grassy field below.

"Phillip," Jesus calls. Phillip turns to look at Jesus. "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" Jesus asks. I flush with embarrassment, relieved that Jesus did not address the question to me. Phillip is one of the more practical people I know. He can spot a problem quickly. Math comes easily to him. He tackles things in a matter-the-fact way – the way good accountants do. Phillip does not answer immediately. He scans the crowd, seeming to estimate the numbers involved and making mental calculations.

At last he speaks up. "It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" In other words, it is a big problem. My mental math isn't as quick, but the magnitude of what Jesus has asked isn't lost on me. Phillip quickly quantifies the issue. We don't have that kind of money. Judas keeps the purse, and at last count we barely had enough to pay the Temple tax. Moreover, I don't think King Herod could host a feast of this magnitude on short notice. Besides, glancing down toward Bethsaida, there isn't enough bread in the whole village to feed an army like this.

Jesus smiles at Phillip, as if He already knew what he would say.

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Andrew was next to me and he spots a boy just below us. He is not of age. The boy has with him a few morsels for the day – no doubt lovingly packed for him by his mother. That Andrew notices is not a surprise. He has an easy way about him that makes him quite approachable. The kind of person who you like immediately. Andrew was the first to see something special in Jesus. He's the one that introduced his brother, Peter, to Jesus.

"Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" Andrew replies.

"That'll never do," I murmur under my breath. "And barley to boot?" I think to myself. It is the grain used to feed horses and livestock. It is also food of the poor. The boy must be from an impoverished family, I think. Or maybe not. The barley harvest precedes the wheat harvest in spring by a week or more, depending on where you are – making barley the first-fruits of the spring harvest.

"Bring the boy to Me," Jesus directs Andrew. Andrew invites the lad to come forward.

"Are you willing to share your cakes and fishes with Me?" Jesus asks him. The boy does not hesitate. He turns everything he has over to Jesus. Five small barley patties and two pickled sardine.

Turning to us, Jesus asks us to have the people recline on the grass. The twelve of us fan out into the crowd. The people are gracious and receptive to our request. They begin to recline on the flowered carpet without hesitation. No one needs to go to the rear, as the folks far back, taking a clue from those up front, also settle in and find a place to recline.

It is fifteen minutes or more before the twelve of us return to the mount with Jesus and the boy. The boy is now seated beside Jesus. The two are having a conversation. What is said I don't know, but the boy seems to be happy.

Jesus does not break away from his conversation with the boy until all twelve of us are all back. He

looks up at us and pauses. His eyes appear to smile back at us. Anticipation builds. I have no idea what He intends to do. Jesus takes the loaves. Holding them in His hands, Jesus prays the familiar prayer. "Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth." It is the customary Jewish blessing over loaves.

What happens next I cannot explain. Jesus breaks the loaves, yet as He breaks them, they do not seem to diminish. I watch in amazement. I have seen something like this before – when we use a bucket to bail water from a fishing boat – the bucket is clearly filled, and we toss water overboard, but none of the water in the haul appears to be missing. Jesus continues to break the loaves, and the barley cakes seem to multiply before our eyes.

"Take and distribute," Jesus tells us. "As much as each wants to eat." I say nothing. No one does.

Peter is first to fill a basket and go off. Then Nathaniel. Bartholomew. Phillip. Soon it is my turn. I take a basket, pack it full of little barley cakes from the growing mound before Jesus and set off for a back corner, determined to feed first the last to arrive. We ferry back and forth between the mount where Jesus is seated with the boy and the crowd.

I must have made thirty or forty trips myself – maybe more. I have lost count. Once all have been fed, we gather once more with He and the boy. Jesus takes the two small pickled fish in His hands. He raises the two fishes up toward heaven and recites another familiar prayer. "Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, at whose word all came to be." It is the customary Jewish blessing over fish, meats and eggs.

As with the loaves, Jesus begins to multiply the fish – but the fish are not split into parts – rather whole pickled sardines seemingly come from the others. My eyes see, but my mind cannot grasp what the eyes see. Fish are multiplied but not divided...

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"Take and distribute," Jesus tells us once again. "As much as each one wants to eat."

Peter goes first again. He fills a basket and heads off. Andrew is next. Then Judas. Soon it is my turn. I retrace my earlier steps, going out to the back corner first. Once again, we ferry back and forth. I have lost count again of the number of trips I made.

The time has passed quickly. The day is now getting late. Thousands are still reclined on the grass. The mood is light and festive. A happy buzz of conversation fills the air. Jesus hands the last two fish and five barley loaves back to the boy. He thanks him and sends him on his way – least his mother worry about him.

He then asks us to go out and collect the leftovers so that we might give them to the poor. We each take a basket and head out, retracing our earlier steps and gathering up what remains. I am surprised that my basket is heaping as I return to the mount. I notice Bartholomew's basket is also full. So is Phillip's. So is Andrews. Wait. They are all full – brimming with leftovers – all twelve!

Reflection 1: God's Initiative

Lord Jesus, You seized the initiative on this day. The crowd did not expect a picnic, nor were they seeking one. Moreover, those Jews on pilgrimage to Jerusalem would no doubt have provisions for the nearly 60-mile journey. None of these details concern You. This is what You are all about: You care for and feed Your people. Whatever the crowd may have wanted from You on this day, no one asked to be fed. You do not wait for the question. Instead, You seize the

"Surely this is the One!" someone yelled out. "This is the Prophet," another says. The crowd begins to stir with excitement begins to chant "This is the Prophet is to come into the world." A wave of energy washes over them.

Jesus takes notice. His calm demeanor is now broken with a sense of urgency. He tells us to give the leftovers to the poor and to send the crowd away. When we have finished we are to put out toward Capernaum – across the Sea. With that, Jesus turns and walks down the knoll, disappearing into the crowd.

Dusk is a time away, but already that waxing Paschal moon is low in the sky. As I go about my work I spot it. Seeing it causes me no dread this evening. I am filled with wonder and amazement. Is there nothing Jesus can't do? I keep my musings to myself. The others do the same. No one says a thing. We go about the work Jesus has given us to do, each keeping his thoughts to himself.

initiative. By doing so, You show us something about God – You do not wait for Your people to ask You for what we need before You supply it – and supply abundantly at that! Your generosity in giving to Your people is simply astounding – if only we will take notice. When we do pause to consider Your abundance, we discover we always have more than enough with plenty to spare. When we lose sight of Your provision, there never is enough to go around.

Application: *Is there some pressing area in my life right now where all the evidence points towards "not enough" or "about to run out?" What would it take for me to trust God's provision right now in that matter?*

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Reflection 2: Adultery

Wheat is the preferred ingredient for baking of bread, but John is clear to specify that the loaves were made from barley. Barley was cheaper and regarded more as animal fodder than as a delicacy for people. According to Jewish custom, barley cakes were the required trespass-offering for a woman caught in adultery. Frequently in the Old Testament the nation of Israel is said to be an adulteress – meaning she has forsaken her love of You, Lord God, and fixed her affection on other lovers – on the idols who compete for her attention. It is fitting that You would take the occasion of this picnic to offer a trespass-

offering, as required, on behalf of Your people. Using the symbol of barley-cakes You make this announcement: Yes, indeed, we are idolaters – our hearts are more fixated on other attractions than on You. Yet, Your love and mercy is greater than our sin. The remedy for my sin is Your super-abundant love and mercy that is supplied with no assistance of my own. The sin-offering which is mine to make according the law, is not only provided by Your hand, I am relieved of the obligation entirely. For this, all You ask of me is to believe on You. Thank You for seizing the initiative, for being the First-mover.

Application: The Gospel message does not downplay the significance of our sinfulness – it calls it like it is. Instead, it proclaims the Good News that Jesus has paid the price on my behalf. In what ways am I still clinging to my unworthiness instead of boasting in the God who saves me?

Reflection 3: Situation Hopeless

Phillip seems to say, “no way!” He calls it as he sees it. The magnitude of the problem is well-beyond any conceivable means. He estimates the size of the crowd and calculates the resources required for the problem at hand. The situation is hopeless. Like Phillip, I am often far better at seeing difficulties than I am at trusting in Your providence and Your provision in the face of difficulties. You do not ask us to suspend our reason – to eschew thoughtful analysis and problem-solving. But You do invite us to believe that Your providence and provision are sufficient. We sometimes fall prey to thinking

that somehow You have missed the details of our present circumstances – that they have snuck up on You unaware. We believe it is all upon us to figure it out or see our way through because somehow Your attention is focused on some larger problem in some other far-off corner of Your creation. But such thinking robs us of unflinching confidence in You – that You are here, fully informed of the reality we face, and intimately involved. Can I trust You in the time of crisis to be present with me? Can I trust You to be greater than my present difficulty?

Application: We often see difficulties and life challenges as obstacles to be endured. But our Lord never sees it that way. He sees them as opportunities to draw us into deeper intimacy with Himself. What would it take for me to ask: “where are You in this present difficulty?” “How is Your Spirit moving in this circumstance to draw me into deeper intimacy with You?”