

“More than a Picnic”

Introduction: They had to have been exhausted. Trying to take in for several days the remarkable teaching of Jesus about the kingdom of God, observing several miracles of healing by his hand to flesh out this teaching, and then having to deal with the opposition to Jesus that had begun in Jerusalem by the religious leaders, must have brought the disciples of Jesus to a place, physically and emotionally, where they need to both rest from, and process, all that they were experiencing.

So, what better way to take a break than to head to the north country. Jesus took them to the region of Galilee, to the Sea of Galilee, a beautiful fresh water lake some 13 miles long and 6 miles wide, surrounded by hills and mountains, reaching 2000 feet in elevation in the west and 4000 feet in the east. Upon arrival, they headed to the east side, “the far shore,” where they set up camp and decided that a hike might be in order.

But no sooner had they reached a good spot at which to take a breather, and sat down to enjoy the view, then they also saw a huge crowd making its way toward them, determined to hear and experience more of Jesus. Apparently, given what Jesus did next, they also looked a bit hungry, which can happen on a hike! So, the stage is set.

I. Passover

A. Now, just before we’re told about the crowd, John (the gospel’s author) drops in this line: “The Jewish Passover Festival was near.” Like a good detective novel, each clue is important, no matter how small it might seem. The Passover actually provides a kind of “bass line” that runs throughout the entire chapter. It’s one of several Jewish festivals that Jesus attends throughout the course of his ministry, and at each he uses the themes and motifs of the particular festival to reveal more about himself. In the case of Passover, it was the festival that celebrated God’s remarkable deliverance of his people, under the leadership of Moses, from slavery in Egypt, as well as the miraculous feeding that followed – manna from heaven – as this people made their way through the wilderness and toward the Promised Land (Ex. 16).

Somehow, what was about to happen was going to have something to do with rescuing and feeding.

II. Philip & Andrew

A. Furthermore, Jesus had in mind things he not only wanted this curious crowd to learn, but also his disciples. And so, Jesus begins there, with a question for Philip: “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” Jesus asks him. Try to put yourself in Philip’s sandals for a moment. You’ve been with Jesus for well over a year now and you’ve seen him do some amazing things – turning water into wine, healing the sick son of a royal official, and enabling a disabled man to walk – but when Jesus asks you to act in what by most accounts is an impossible situation, it all gets a bit intimidating. Philip doesn’t really answer the question of where, but (maybe he’s the trustee of the group) it goes to “How much?” Feeding all these people is just not in the budget, Philip replies. It’s a realistic response and a practical observation, but it fails to apply the presence and power of Jesus that Philip has been experiencing.

B. Then there's Andrew. Andrew goes one better than Philip as he searches around and takes inventory of what might be available and at least finds something. But it's not much. It's not even a ham and cheese on rye with lettuce and tomato and a cookie and a Coke thrown in for good measure. Rather, barley is the bread of the poor and what this boy has is more like dry peanut butter on the butt ends of the loaf with a soggy pickle for dessert. Andrew is forced to conclude that the situation is indeed hopeless: "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far with they go among so many?" But before he gives up, he does something helpful. He brings the boy and his bread and his fish to the attention of Jesus.

C. So often, given the situation of our lives, or of our world, we have no idea what to do. We feel overwhelmed. Our circumstances seem insurmountable: an illness that won't go away; a relationship that is going the wrong way; a job that is going nowhere; not to mention famine, floods, and armed conflict. As insurmountable as any of these may feel, the starting point is always to bring what we have to the attention of Jesus, for he is always, always, able to do more than we could ever ask or imagine.

III. Jesus

A. In this case, notice how Jesus begins – with thanksgiving: "Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed . . ." I don't know about you but, holding that little lunch in my hands, I probably would have complained: "Lord, how do you expect me to work with this?!" But it's an interesting thing. When we complain, what we're really saying is that our circumstances are ore powerful than our Savior. But, when we give thanks, we're inviting the Savior to work. This giving thanks by Jesus was so noteworthy that a bit later in the text, when John is describing the arrival of some additional people, he does so in this way, "Then some boats from Tiberias landed near the place where the people had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks" (v. 23). That last part about giving thanks was certainly not necessary, but it had obviously made such an impression on John that he just had to include it.

B. Adele Calhoun, in her *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, observes that "gratitude is rooted in the reality that not everything goes perfectly but that God is present." In these less than perfect circumstances, Jesus gave thanks for what he had, not what he didn't have, and called upon his Father to multiply what he had as he began to distribute it to the crowd. And when the disciples gathered up leftovers in their baskets, what on earth must they have been thinking?! Gratitude helps us to pay attention to God and to notice that God really and truly is at work, in our lives and in the world, no matter how challenging the circumstances.

C. If we think about the actual miracle for a moment, we can see that the miraculous is not Jesus playing parlor games with the natural order of things, seeking to impress others with his power. Rather, he was using his power to restore the natural order of things, to heal what had become broken. In this case, he was delivering the crowd from hunger and poverty, enabling them to enjoy restored fellowship for an afternoon, and pointing them ahead to the time when we will enjoy sweet fellowship with one another, and with Jesus himself, for an eternity. He would also go on, as the chapter continues, to show how he was the true bread that had come from heaven, and that as we nourish ourselves on him, then we will truly live.

D. There were, however, some in the crowd who couldn't see this clearly. Instead, they wanted to make Jesus king by force. This was likely the group of Jews known as zealots, who hid out in the mountains surrounding the lake and wanted to rid themselves of Roman rule by armed revolution. They rightly saw in Jesus the Moses-like Prophet that God had promised would come into the world and wield great power (Dt. 18:15-18). But they wrongly concluded that they could force him to take on their agenda. Jesus cannot be forced. He will not use his power for any agenda, be it on the right or on the left, other than the kingdom of God. Moreover, his power comes not by a sword, but through a cross. Through his loving sacrifice, the world would be rescued from sin and suffering, and God's new creation would begin. That is his powerful agenda.

What seems insurmountable to you today? For what are you thankful? What might Jesus be asking you to give into his hands so that the insufficient can become more sufficient? Without Jesus the best we can hope to do is to make people sit down and organize them into groups. With Jesus, anything can happen.