

St Mark's Lutheran Church  
Pentecost 9  
John 6:1-21  
Pastor Ben Pfeiffer

**Introduction**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen. Over the next five weeks our Gospel readings will follow the progression of John 6, from the feeding of the five thousand, to Jesus' claim to be the 'bread of life' and the various reactions, right through to the end of the chapter when Jesus is deserted by almost everyone except a few faithful disciples.

It's a strange progression; a progression downwards if you like! From the miraculous to the mundane, from a growing approval rating, to one that just plummets to the ground, from great big crowds coming to see Jesus, to just a few faithful followers willing to hear him out. What happened in there? Well, let's follow the progression of John 6 over the next few weeks to see.

Today, we will consider the great need that is presented to Jesus, the small protest that is made, the small provision that is offered, and the great sign that sets these other events in motion.

**The great need that presents**

Firstly, the great need. *'Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick.'* Jesus is on the move but so too are the crowds. He withdraws. They follow. He goes up a mountain. They scramble up right behind him.

Then, as the day wears on, their other needs are surpassed by one great need: the need to eat. It is hard for us to put ourselves in their shoes because we rarely find ourselves without the provision of basic food, even in the middle of a lockdown. When we say things like, 'There's nothing to eat' or 'I'm hungry,' we usually mean, 'There is nothing exactly right here right now that fits my exact craving or desire.'

These people, I imagine, in this crowd, were genuinely hungry, as many people were in Jesus' day and many people still are around the world. So if nothing else, the beginning of our text reminds us to be grateful for what we have and to have our eyes and ears and hearts open to the human need around us, as Jesus does.

### **The little protest that is made**

*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?" He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"*

I think it is fair to say that Philip failed Jesus' test, not because his response was inaccurate, but because he missed the point of the question. Philip was from this area and so the question is probably directed to him, as if to say, 'You're from around here. You're the local. What's good in this area? Where do you find a table for, say, 5000 men and their families?'

Philip's little protest shows the human tendency to focus on what can't be done rather than what can, to focus on the economic cost rather than the human need and to focus on our great inadequacy rather than God's great power to do more than we ask or imagine. The walking on water scene has a similar lesson. One commentator says that Jesus tests his disciples not to discover *their* potential but to help them discover his, so they put their trust in him (Frederick Bruner, John's Gospel).

### **The little provision that is offered**

Enter another disciple, Andrew. The same commentator says that if Philip failed Jesus' test, then Andrew at least gets a pass mark. *'Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"* This little provision. But at least he brings it to Jesus' attention. At least he asks the question. He shows a little faith, a little hope, in presenting this little boy and what little food he has. He gives Jesus a little credit for what he may be capable of under these circumstances.

It's as though Jesus says to us, 'Bring me what you have. You see it's smallness. I see it's potential. You see what it can't do. I see what it can do. Bring me what you have.' Jesus wants us and our participation in the work of his kingdom. He doesn't need it but he wants it. Just witness the disciples in our text, running around asking questions, sitting people down, bringing this young boy forward, collecting the leftovers. They play a small but important part, because no part is really small in the service of God. No provision is really small in the hands of God.

It's only our sin that gets in the way, our unwillingness to come to him, our excuses, our diminishing of others or ourselves. It's only when we rest on our own knowledge, our own understanding, our own experience, our own resources that we limit God.

### **The great sign that is provided**

So, the great sign. *Jesus said, "Have the people sit down..." 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... When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets.*

The great sign, the great miracle, the great feeding of the 5000 plus, is told with such simplicity; in such unspectacular fashion. It is almost as though it could have gone by unnoticed. It just happens. He just feeds them. Some in the crowd do get a little excited. Some call him a Prophet. Some want to make him king. But his time has not yet come and so Jesus slips away into the night.

The point is not the sign but the one to whom the sign points. Their need was great but they were in the presence of greatness. Their offerings were small but what he could do with their offerings was not small. Philip failed the test but Jesus passed it. Andrew's faith was small, but small faith, in the right person, can move mountains.

Friends, our fears and failures and fragilities, in the face of viruses and lockdowns and the struggles of daily life, serve to remind us of how great our need is. Today's text reminds us where we can go to have our greatest needs met; to be filled and forgiven, redeemed and restored, and put to work in the service of the one who provides it all to us free of cost, because he bore the cost himself.

May that same God provide you with everything you need in these days of lockdown, especially his peace that is beyond our understanding, and may that peace guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord, until we meet again. Amen.