

Another Face in the Crowd

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

John 6:1-21

The feeding of the five thousand is, of course, a staple among stories from the Bible about Jesus. We learned this story as children, and we know what it's supposed to mean: whenever Jesus is present, there's always enough. We have this experience whenever there's a potluck dinner. Of course, we can extend the metaphor to mean any kind of ministry activity; we know that if God has asked us to do a thing, God has also given us whatever we need to accomplish it. Even when it looks like there aren't resources to go around, if God has called us to do ministry in some particular way, then God already has or very quickly will provide whatever is needed to get it started. That's what this story means. The real question is, is that all this story means?

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Well, you know me. I'm not inclined at any point to believe that any passage can have only one thing to say, and this passage is no exception. I want us to hold on to that meaning, but I want to look for something else as well.

There are plenty of details in this passage; the story of how Jesus multiplies the loaves and fishes is just one part of the story; there's a story around that story as well. For example, right off the bat, Jesus has huge crowds following him. I've been studying the Gospel of Mark recently with some friends, and one of the things we've noticed is that Jesus always seems to have a crowd following him. You'd think that'd be a good thing. It isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it's very clear that Jesus never measured the success of his ministry by how large a crowd he drew, nor did he ever shrink from doing any ministry because there were too many people. This suggests that it's perfectly okay to be a small church, as long as we're doing the ministry God calls us to do, and it's also perfectly okay to be a large church under the same circumstances. It isn't the number of people who show up that measures the success of an endeavor, but whether or not the mission and method reflect God's influence over it.

Did you know that barley loaves were the bread of poor people who couldn't afford bread made of wheat? There's something very heartening in the idea that Jesus takes something humble and makes a meal with it. To me, that's a big part of the gospel story: it's easy to do amazing things with lots of expensive toys. It's more than amazing, it's downright moving when Jesus does something wonderful with humble means; for example, God can even do meaningful things with someone like me.

Here's another interesting detail that we might otherwise overlook in this story: Jesus seems to define ministry as both teaching and service. The story says that Jesus went up on the mountain and sat down. This isn't intended to communicate that Jesus was tired, but rather that he was preparing to teach. It was customary for a teacher in those days to sit down with his disciples in order to engage in the learning process. It's

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hard to picture a small, intimate discussion of the Scriptures with five thousand close friends, isn't it? It's pretty clear that while Jesus was there to teach, not everyone in the crowd was ready to learn. John gives the clear impression that many in the crowd were there because they had seen Jesus showing signs—performing miracles—and they wanted to get in on the action. It's particularly interesting that Jesus knows this, and yet insists on feeding the whole crowd, not just the ones who are there for the “right” reasons. Jesus didn't see the meeting of basic needs—feeding or healing people—as a matter of reward for believing the right things. He taught people about the good news, and he did what he could for them, but he didn't make one thing contingent upon the other.

You can tell that the crowd wasn't particularly committed to what Jesus was teaching by how they respond to Jesus when he performs good works for them. “This must be the prophet,” they said. “He must be the one who's supposed to save the world.” My first reaction is to say, “my, my, what very perceptive people. They figured out that Jesus is the messiah.” When we look more closely, though, we see that they haven't been listening to a word. These folks want the Jesus who feeds them, who makes them wealthy, the Jesus who leaves them alone but hands over the goods. These folks are religious consumers, and they know a good deal when they see one. Their next sentiment something Jesus could have gone all day without hearing: let's make him king, whether he wants to be or not.

Maybe you've seen the commercials for the office supply store chain, Staples, in which they say that having a Staples store nearby is like having an “easy” button. The crowd wants to ensure that they'll always have their needs provided for. They're trying to take a short-term, quick fix and turn it into a long-term solution. They want things to be easy, and they think Jesus is the “easy” button.

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There's a difference between making Jesus a political king and making Jesus the lord of one's life. The most glaring difference is possibly the most important: making Jesus a political king involves trying to get him to do what we want; making Jesus lord of our lives is when we try to get ourselves to do what Jesus wants. That difference isn't even subtle. When I look around at the world in which I live, I see an alarming trend within the church: too often people who call themselves "Christians" seem to be more concerned about making sure other people follow Jesus than they are about following Jesus themselves. Some folks seem more concerned about the sins of others—the habits of others, the shortcomings of others, the indiscretions of others, the mistakes of others—than they are concerned with following Jesus themselves. These are the folks who would make Jesus king by force. Jesus is going to feed them anyway, but that doesn't mean he'll let them decide his mission or his ministry.

It might have been interesting to be in the crowd that day, to see and hear the wide variety of reactions and responses to Jesus. We might have seen everything from the desperately interested to the unabashedly cynical. We have that choice, even today: we can be part of the crowd if we want to be, looking for the highest return for the smallest investment. We could decide that Jesus should be king so that He can do wonderful things for us all the time.

Jesus calls us, not to be one of the crowd, but to be one of the disciples. Our willingness to proclaim Jesus as Lord rather than King makes us different from the crowd. Our willingness to try to live by his teaching makes us disciples. The crowd is about being fed, but disciples are about being sent. The crowd is about seeing miracles and wonders, but disciples are about doing what Jesus tells them to do. The crowd is made up of consumers; disciples are proclaimers. The crowd gives in order to get; disciples give because they've already gotten.

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We are given the opportunity to watch Jesus do something amazing with only a few loaves and fishes, our own meager offerings. We have a choice as to how we're going to see it. We can see it as disciples, listening carefully to what Jesus calls us to do, entering into that ministry with humility, joy and expectation; there's a lot of joy to be found in that approach.

If we take the other approach, we might end up being just another face in the crowd.