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Bridgeway Church
Gospel of John #18
October 6, 2019

Sermon Summary #18

The Bread of Life Never Grows Stale John 6:1-15, 25-35, 48-51

I've told one particular story a number of times over the years, but for whatever reason it remains vividly impressed on my mind. It's almost as if it were yesterday, even though it took place on January 5th, 1976. I can still recall everything I heard, where I was standing, the cold of that winter night, and what I was thinking as Ann and I stood outside in the parking lot as we watched the fire creep closer and closer to our apartment. I learned a lot about myself that night, and it wasn't pretty.

I was in my third year at Dallas Theological Seminary and we had just a couple of weeks earlier moved into a new apartment complex. It was the dead of winter, well below freezing. Ann was asleep. I was up late, studying. Suddenly I heard the word "Fire!" echoing in the parking lot outside. I jumped out of my chair and ran outside, only to see my worst fears realized. A few doors down from ours, a fire was raging. I could see flames leaping out through the front door and the windows. We later learned that a lady had become enraged with her husband and decided to seek vengeance. She piled all his clothes and other belongings in the middle of the living room floor, doused them with lighter fluid, set it aflame, and then walked across the street and sat down on the curb to watch it burn.

My first reaction was to awaken Ann and get her out to safety. By the time she had escaped and we moved our cars away from any danger, the fire department had arrived and cordoned off the entire complex. Any hope of my running back in to salvage something had ended.

It was there in the parking lot, around midnight, that I learned an important and very painful lesson about myself. It was almost as if the flames that engulfed the apartments also served to shed a very uncomfortable light on my own soul. As I stood there, lamenting what I anticipated would be the loss of all our earthly possessions, it suddenly struck me *how attached I had become to material things*. *My sinful dependence on earthly stuff* was exposed. If you had ever accused me, before that night, of being materialistic, I would have bristled with self-righteous denial. If you had suggested that my happiness was in any way suspended on having stuff, whether furniture or electrical appliances or clothes or TV's or books, I would have laughed at you.

But as I stood there, close to freezing to death, *I was suddenly convicted by the painful realization that my happiness was so closely tied up with what I owned*. It was genuinely scary moment. By the way, just so you know how far back our relationship goes, David and Myrna Lightfoot immediately began calling our friends to ask for contributions to get us back on our feet. I think David was in his first year of seminary at the time.

Here's my point. We frequently talk about the sole sufficiency of Christ, but I'm afraid that it is often little more than a religious cliché. Though I had often affirmed its truth and preached sermons on the topic, I never really knew that Jesus was enough until I was confronted with the fact that he was all I had left. Now, it actually wasn't that bad. I still had Ann and we both had our health and good friends who stood by us. But in that one chilling moment in 1976 it suddenly dawned on me in a way it never had before: Jesus isn't simply necessary; he's also enough. It hit home in a powerful way that no destructive act of a mentally disturbed woman four doors down can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus!

As things turned out, the fire was extinguished just as it reached our apartment. There was extensive smoke and water damage, but most of our possessions and most of my library were saved. Still, the lesson I learned that night has stayed with me. *If I have Jesus, I have all I need. That's not just a religious cliché. It's a vitally true, life-changing reality. No material loss could ever pose a threat to who I am and what I have in Christ. No personal tragedy, no matter how painful or inconvenient, can separate me from the love that God has for me in Jesus.*

I'm persuaded today more than ever that virtually every problem we create for ourselves is the product of a lie, a falsehood embedded deeply in our souls which says that some "thing" or some person other than Jesus Christ can quench the thirst in our hearts. We are by nature sinfully determined to make life work without him. St. Augustine famously spoke of a God-shaped vacuum in every heart, one which only God himself can fill. But we steadfastly refuse to believe it is true. We fervently try to stuff our souls and to fill that vacuum with anything that will make us feel full. The Bible calls that idolatry.

Jesus comes to us in the gospel with an invitation to sit at a feast and to glut ourselves with all the blessings of the kingdom of God and to drink of water that will forever quench our spiritually parched souls. But we persist in eating fast food and slaking our thirst at the shallow water wells of a fallen world. Our sinful flesh refuses to feed on Christ, leaving us painfully empty and ever more determined to find satisfaction in something or someone else. We stubbornly refuse to believe that Jesus is not only necessary, but that he is enough.

So what does all this have to do with the miraculous feeding of several thousand people? Very simply this: whatever else we may learn from this story, its central theme is the perfect and glorious sufficiency and over-abounding spiritual supply that we have in our Lord Jesus Christ. When human resources are scarce or begin to run dry, Jesus is our supply.

So let's look at this story and how it teaches us the same lesson that God was teaching me on that sub-freezing night in Dallas in 1976.

A Story Told Four Times

The story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 is the only miracle that appears in all four gospel records: Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; and here in John 6:1-15. In order to provide you with a complete portrait of this story and its significance for us today, I'm going to combine all four accounts into one. So some of the things I will say about this incident won't be obvious from John's record of it. I will be drawing equally from the other three gospel accounts.

As most of you know, there is another story in Matthew 15:32-39 and in Mark 8:1-10 that has Jesus feeding **4,000** in much the same way he feeds the **5,000** here. The first question that many ask is whether or not the feeding of the 4,000 and 5,000 are the same event and whether Mark and Matthew who record both events might have made a mistake. The answer is No, they are **not** the same event. The simple fact is that Jesus performed this miracle twice: once for 4,000 men and another time for 5,000.

There are numerous **similarities** as well as **differences** between the two miracles, but that need not detain us. I will only point out that the differences between the two stories are significant enough to justify our conclusion that Jesus performed this miracle of feeding the multitudes twice. For example, the number of loaves and fish is different: 5 barley loaves and 2 fish in John 6 where he feeds the 5,000, but 7 barley loaves and "a few fish" in Matthew 15 when he feeds the 4,000. Also, the number of "leftovers" is also different: 12 baskets full in John 6 where the 5,000 are fed, but only 7 baskets in Mark 8 where the 4,000 are fed. Of course, the number of men is different: 5,000 in John 6 and 4,000 in Mark 8. And the place of the two miracles is different: the 5,000 are fed in the Bethsaida, a Jewish area on the NE shore of the Sea of Galilee, while the 4,000 are fed in the Decapolis, a Gentile area on the SE shore.

The decisive factor in knowing that these are two separate miracles comes from the words of Jesus himself in Matthew 16:9-10 – "Do you not yet perceive? Do you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered?" So Jesus clearly mentions two separate but very similar miracles.

Let me mention several other important parts to this story before we consider its application to us today.

First, the question often comes up as to **whether or not this was a genuine miracle**. Liberal critics like to scoff at the idea that Jesus actually multiplied the loaves and fish. The only "miracle" that occurred, so they say, was in the hearts of those present. The people were selfish: those who had brought food refused to share with those who didn't. So, Jesus took the lead and shared what little he and the disciples had brought. This made everyone else feel ashamed, so they began to give of their own supply and before they knew what was happening enough food had been made

available to all! But it had actually been there all the time. It was just a matter of overcoming the selfishness of some so that all might be able to eat.

Needless to say, I believe this was a genuine miracle not unlike what Jesus did when he turned water into wine or calmed the Sea of Galilee or raised the little girl from the dead. Nature is at his beck and call!

Second, in Mark 6:30-33 the zeal of the people is evident: they ran on foot around to the other side of the Sea of Galilee and actually got there ahead of Jesus. Here in John's gospel we are told that they followed Jesus there because of the many healings they saw him perform (6:2).

Third, according to Mark 6:34 there was a "great crowd." In John 6:10 and again in Mark 6:44 we are told that there were about 5,000 men present, which means the total would have been around **20,000** when you include women and children.

Fourth, although John doesn't tell us explicitly that Jesus was moved by compassion, he does hint at it in John 6:5 where Jesus says to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" However, Mark's account makes it quite clear as we are told that Jesus was moved with "compassion" (Mark 6:34). Jesus was deeply bothered by the fact that so many people, most of whom he'd never met, were hungry.

Fifth, John simply tells us that "they went up on the mountain" (John 6:3) but Mark explains further that they needed to "rest a while" (Mark 6:31). This is the area known today as the Golan Heights. They do everything possible to escape the crowds and yet to no avail. But Jesus is neither embittered or resentful and he's certainly not protective of his space. Nothing like: "What right do these people have to invade my privacy?" Jesus never saw people as a nuisance.

Sixth, the disciples are getting worried: it's late and there isn't a McDonald's anywhere to be found. Where's a Hideaway Pizza franchise or a Jimmy John's when you need it most? John indicates that they were on a mountain (John 6:3) while Mark is even more explicit. He refers to it as a "desolate place" (Mark 6:35) and there's nothing to eat.

Seventh, in an effort to awaken in them a sense of need so they will learn always to turn to him as the one who alone can supply, he says to Philip: "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat" (John 6:5). It makes sense that he would ask this of Philip, since he came from the nearby town of Bethsaida (John 1:44). You can almost hear them talk among themselves: "Is he making fun of us? Does he realize the extent of the problem here? What's going on?"

So they say: "Jesus, can't you see how many people are here? It would take two hundred denarii to buy enough food for them!" 200 denarii would be the equivalent of 8 months wages for an ordinary working man!

Eighth, it's only in John's gospel that we discover that the five loaves and two fish were supplied by a young boy. A "loaf", by the way, was not like our sliced bread today with 20-30 pieces; it was rather a flat, pancake-like piece of barley bread.

Ninth, I wish we were given more of an explanation as to how this all happened. Did the miracle occur when Jesus gave thanks (John 6:11)? Did it occur when he distributed it to the disciples? How did it happen? Was new food caused to arise out of the old? Was it a creation out of nothing? We don't know. But I like to think the disciples experienced a shocking surprise each time they looked into their bags:

Try to envision Peter casually walking out to the crowds, saying silently to himself: "This is not going to turn out well. This is really going to be embarrassing. Jesus gave me only enough bread to feed one family at most. Well, here goes." So he opens his bag and . . . ! "Whoa! What the heck happened? Where did all this bread come from? There's more fish in here than in the Sea of Galilee!"

So, he turns to find John: "Hey John, look in your bag." "Why?" asks John, "what's the point?" "Just look in your bag. Trust me." "O.K. Whoa!"

Andrew runs over to them: “Guys, you’ll never guess what just happened.” “Oh, yes we can.” “No, no, you got to listen! Not only did I find hundreds of loaves and fish in my bag, but every time I pull some out and feed one of these groups of a hundred or fifty, and then go back to my bag to see what’s left, there’s even *more* than what I had when I began!”

The awesome reality of what was happening slowly began to sink in. I have no doubt but that they walked as if on holy ground, with trembling hands pulling more and more fish and bread from their bags, mouths gaping wide in astonishment, eyes filled with tears as they see the people happily filled and satisfied.

Tenth, now here’s where it gets interesting. Sometime after the feeding of the 5,000, they find themselves in almost the same situation. You can read about it over in Mark 8. This time there are only 4,000 men, but still around 16,000 total! Listen carefully to what is written in Mark 8:1-4.

In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat, he called his disciples to him and said to them, “I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. And some of them have come from far away.” And his disciples answered him, “How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?” (Mark 8:1-4).

Did you see that? The disciples surely couldn’t have already forgotten what Jesus did for the 5,000. How is it that now they wonder how anyone can feed so many in such a desolate place? Here are some possible explanations. (1) The feeding of the 5,000 in John 6 was of Jews in Bethsaida; here in Mark 8 the 4,000 are almost all Gentiles in the Decapolis. Perhaps the disciples never dreamed that Jesus would be willing to do for Gentiles what he had for Jews? (2) According to John 6:26, after feeding the 5,000, Jesus rebuked the crowds for following him only to get food. Perhaps the disciples thought better of bringing up the subject again. (3) And we must never lose sight of man’s vast capacity for unbelief and spiritual dullness.

Are we not also, at times, guilty of this same forgetfulness? Or is it an attitude of entitlement that simply takes for granted God’s goodness? God blesses us in remarkable and undeserved ways, he delivers, he answers a prayer, his providence sustains us through difficult times, and then we either gripe that he doesn’t do it more often or we forget about his provision completely.

Lessons to Learn

So, what’s this all about? Is it just a wonderful miracle story about overcoming hunger in the wilderness? Or is there something deeper and more spiritually profound at work? Yes!

(1) Miracles are wonderful. I wish we saw more of them. But don’t think that they will always result in the instant conversion of everyone who witnesses them.

We read in John 6:14 that the people concluded from this miracle that Jesus must be “the Prophet” who had been foretold in the OT. You may recall this prophecy in Deuteronomy 18:15. There Moses declared: “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers – it is to him you shall listen.” If Moses had led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, then surely the second and superior prophet would enable them to escape servitude to Rome. Jesus knew they were thinking in this way, so he “withdrew again to the mountain by himself” (John 6:15).

Yes, Jesus is the King, but the way to his kingdom wasn’t to be through military force but by virtue of his dying on a cross and rising from the dead. And it wasn’t God’s design that the consummation of his kingdom should happen at the first coming of Jesus, but rather at his second coming, at the close of history.

At his trial, Pontius Pilate asked him: “Are you the King of the Jews?” (John 18:33). Jesus answered in John 18:36, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” So, yes, says Jesus, I am a king, but not the way you think I am.

Jesus is king of the entire universe. Everything in it belongs to him. John told us back in chapter one that Jesus is the one who made it and one day he will return to lay claim to his creation. But at his first coming he does not come as a military conqueror to seize the world by force. He comes, as strange as it may sound, to be bread so that we might ingest him and embrace him and trust him to satisfy our souls and not merely our bellies.

(2) This story is also about learning to trust God to supply what by human measurement seems impossible. Our needs, no matter how desperate, can never outstrip God's power or purpose to provide. "And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19). Our mistake is in thinking that luxuries are needs. Rather, we should instinctively say: "If it's something I truly need, he will supply it. If he doesn't supply it, then I didn't really need it in the first place."

This is the point of the "*leftovers*." We're talking about a serious need for doggie bags! **Why 12 baskets?** I don't want to read into the text more than I should or be guilty of spiritualizing anything. But it may be because of the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles of the Church: the supply of Jesus is so lavish that even the scraps of his provision are enough to provide for the needs of his people. **Why 7 baskets** in Mark 8? Probably because the number 7 is symbolic in Scripture for perfection and wholeness: what Jesus provides is perfect, it meets our needs precisely!

(3) We see here a divine principle that appears all through Scripture: God takes what is small and insignificant and accomplishes great things. He takes Moses' shepherd's staff and uses it to deliver a nation out of bondage in Egypt! He supplies David with a few small stones to slay a giant! He gives Samson the jawbone of a donkey to slay an army! And he takes one boy's pathetic little lunch to feed thousands!

(4) This story tells us much about the miracles of Jesus in general. Jesus is not like David Blaine, street magician, or like Chris Angel, mindfreak. They perform a trick and everyone goes: "Oooh! Wow! How'd you do that? Cool. Do it again. Do it again!" No. Miracles are a sign of what is to come. Miracles are a preview of coming attractions. Miracles are an appetizer of the full banquet that is to come in the new heavens and new earth.

(5) But most important of all, in this particular miracle Jesus was using a physical experience to illustrate a spiritual reality: ***nothing ultimately satisfies except himself!***

Look closely at what is said a bit farther down in John 6:25-35, 48-51. Here we see that ***the feeding of the multitude with physical bread was designed as an object lesson of the immeasurably greater blessing of being fed spiritually with the all-satisfying bread of life: Jesus himself.***

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:25-35).

"I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:48-51).

It's as if Jesus said: "Don't you all get it yet? Stop thinking with your stomach! Yes, I was happy to feed you with physical bread because I knew you were hungry. I didn't want you to go without anything to eat. But I had hoped that you would recognize in the process that your greatest need isn't physical, it's spiritual. I had hoped you would see that the real blessing isn't bread, but me. I am the bread of life; not just physical life. You can eat the best bread on the

planet, and you will still, some day, die. All earthly bread eventually will grow stale. But if you eat the bread that I give you, if you will ingest spiritually and believe in who I am and what I am doing on the cross, though you die physically you will never perish spiritually.”

This is not ultimately about people having something to eat when they are hungry but is ultimately about Jesus himself as the bread of heaven who feeds us and fills us and satisfies us spiritually.

“One of the reasons God created bread—or created the grain and the water and yeast and fire and human intelligence to make it, . . . is so that when Jesus Christ came into the world, he would be able to use the enjoyment of bread and the nourishment of bread as an illustration of what it means to believe on him and be satisfied with him. . . . Bread exists to help us know what it is like to be satisfied in Jesus” (John Piper).

Piper goes on to point out that it’s the same for water (John 4:14) and light (John 14:6) and every other good thing that God has made. Nothing exists for itself. “All things were created through him and *for him*” (Colossians 1:16). Every honorable pleasure that we have in the created world is designed by God to give us a faint taste of heaven and make us hunger for Christ. Every partial satisfaction in this life points to the perfect satisfaction in Jesus who made the world.

“The pleasures of warm bread should send our senses and our spirits to Christ as the bread of life. The pleasures of cold water when we’re hot and thirsty should send our senses and our spirits to Christ as the living water. The pleasures of light making all other natural beauties visible should send our senses and our spirits to Christ as the true light of the world” (Piper).

Jesus is telling them then and us today: “I don’t just *give* the bread of life. I *am* the bread of life!”

So when Jesus takes the little boy’s loaves and a few fish and feeds 20,000 or more he’s opening up a window on himself. He is putting on display all that he is for a spiritually famished people.

Listen again to John 6:51 - “The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” His death on the cross for sinners is the offer of bread to starving souls! Will you come and eat?

So don’t fixate on the bread and the pleasure it brings. Fixate on Jesus and the treasure that he is for you. Don’t look to the product of the miracle, but to the person. This is not a story about what Jesus can do for your stomach to prolong your physical life, but what he rejoices in doing for your soul now and evermore into eternity. Come and feast on him!