

The Bread of Jesus, Graciously Given

John 6:1-15

After these things Jesus went over the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. ² Then a great multitude followed Him, because they saw His signs which He performed on those who were diseased. ³ And Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat with His disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, a feast of the Jews, was near. ⁵ Then Jesus lifted up His eyes, and seeing a great multitude coming toward Him, He said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?" ⁶ But this He said to test him, for He Himself knew what He would do. ⁷ Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little." ⁸ One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, ⁹ "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two small fish, but what are they among so many?" ¹⁰ Then Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. ¹¹ And Jesus took the loaves, and when He had given thanks He distributed them to the disciples, and the disciples to those sitting down; and likewise of the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² So when they were filled, He said to His disciples, "Gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing is lost." ¹³ Therefore they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten. ¹⁴ Then those men, when they had seen the sign that Jesus did, said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world." ¹⁵ Therefore when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone.

Dear Christian Friends,

Here we are, in the middle of Lent, considering the death of our Lord. Yet, in the middle of this season, on this fourth Sunday, we take a little detour, and catch our breaths. There is plenty of gloom ahead for our Lord, but here, in the middle of the season, we lift up our hearts for a moment, to consider the gracious manner of Jesus, who is the Bread of life, sent down not to destroy men, but to comfort, feed, and nourish them. The time of our lesson is about one year before His Crucifixion, just before his next to last Passover. After learning of the death of John the Baptist, Jesus and His disciples had left Capernaum by boat, so that they could get away to a quiet place. It was not to be, for a huge crowd of people learned that Jesus would be crossing the sea, and hurried around the shore. By the time Jesus and the disciples arrived, the crowd, well over 5000 people, was there waiting for Him. So much for solitude, rest, and prayer. Yet here they were. They had come because of His miracles. They wanted to see more signs. Their heart was in the wrong place. Jesus could have sent them back the way they had come, but that was not His way. He had compassion upon them, because they were like sheep that had no shepherd. And so rather than resting, He healed and taught,

and soon, before anyone knew it, it was getting near the evening, and they had a serious problem on their hands. These foolish people had set out into the wilderness with hardly a thought given to what they would do when they got there. They brought little or no food, and they were nowhere near a city that could provide bread for such a large group. If Jesus sent them away now, many of them would faint along the way.

Think of these people. They set out foolishly, for foolish reasons, and as we see at the end of the lesson, with foolish intentions. What obligation did Jesus have to feed them? None. Yet, not only did Jesus teach and heal them, He provided for their daily bread. This is always the way of our Lord. Which of the children of men deserves their daily bread? Have we not also acted foolishly, wasted what was given to us, done our labor labor or filled our offices with impure motives. Haven't we daily forgotten that we are only sojourners on this earth, and it is not our home? When we eat the daily bread which Jesus gives us even so, do we remember that He is the Bread which comes down from heaven to give life to the world? Yet, even with all our failures, He still provides us with every need of body and soul. He does not give up on us, but continues to teach us and comfort us.

And so, in the wilderness, as ever, Jesus is the Master teacher. Here was an opportunity to test the faith of His disciples, who, by now were getting rather anxious. They saw the problem before Jesus said anything. The other Gospels tell us that the disciples had already urged Jesus to send the crowd away before it was too late. Jesus responded, much to the disciples chagrin, "No. We should feed them first." Imagine their thoughts. "With what?" Before they could voice their exasperation, Jesus asked Philip, "Where shall we buy bread that these may eat?" Well, even if there *were* a nearby place with enough bread for something like 7000 or more people (for 5000 was just the number of men, not counting women and children), they had a bigger problem — namely, a lack of funds. One does not just invite a small city out to dinner on a whim. Philip responded, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough to give each of them even a little!" This was the equivalent in those days of seven month's wages for one laborer, and it is likely that Philip names this amount because that's what they had in their treasury.

Now this was a test, and the disciples just failed. It was rather obvious that there was no natural way out of this problem, and rather than trusting that Jesus, the Lord's Anointed, would surely provide what men could not, they basically just threw up their hands in exasperation. They had forgotten the miracle of the water made wine. They had forgotten the words which Jesus preached on another mountain, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?"

There was Jesus, standing amongst a crowd of foolish people, surrounded by forgetful disciples with weak faiths who still did not trust that Jesus would provide. And there, where everyone around Him was a failure, Jesus was gracious. He showed love to the foolish, faithless, and forgetful, and set about to perform a miracle that would meet the bodily needs of the crowd. Jesus did not clap his hands, and cause a feast of good things to appear out of nothing. He had the crowd sit down, and then, in an orderly fashion, He took bread and fish, and from it made more bread and fish, as if it were just the most normal thing in the world. The people clearly knew something miraculous was happening before their eyes, and yet it was so *normal*. The disciples took the bread and fish, and kept dividing it up, and passing it out, giving people as much as they wanted to eat, until everyone had eaten their fill.

Jesus was not there to entertain or grandstand, but to educate, to confirm the witness of the Scriptures, and to increase faith. He chooses ordinary means to do this, so ordinary, in fact, that men usually fail to see when the Lord is providing the needs of body and soul. How seldom do we remember that the daily bread which we eat today, comes to us from God, and without His gracious care, we would all have no food, clothing, or shelter? He gives us His spiritual food: the forgiveness of sins, comfort, hope, faith, and love in much the same way: through ordinary means like teaching the Bible, the water of Baptism, and the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. The miracle almost goes unnoticed by men, even when God is working powerfully to call men to repent of their sins, to work saving faith in their hearts, and to feed and nourish His people. Yet before long there are baskets full of bread and fish where there was nothing before. There is faith where before there was only unbelief.

Would that the crowd shared the faith of the disciples. The reaction of the people is not the reaction that Jesus desired. Oh, they did indeed believe on Him. They even called him the Prophet of whom Moses wrote. They believed on Him as a man whom they could parade into Jerusalem for the Passover, and take over the kingdom from their pagan Roman overlords. Did Jesus not know that this would be the result of His gracious gift of bread and fish? It is certain that He knew the nature of men's hearts. He knew that these people only came because He was doing miracles. From the beginning their heart was in the wrong place. Nevertheless, He taught and healed and fed them. And this is their response: to take Him by force and make Him their King. Yes, Jesus knew that this was the nature of these people, but He taught them anyway. He fed them anyway. He does not coerce their wills and force them to believe. Where men resist the Holy Spirit, and abuse the gifts of God, Jesus allows that resistance and abuse to take place.

Why does Jesus provide for people when this is the way

they react? Why does He test His disciples, when He knows they will fail? Because He is Jesus. He is the Savior. He has compassion upon the hopeless cases. His mercy is not just for those who believe in Him, but also for those who do not. Often we follow Jesus for improper reasons. We chase after Him because we think that He will give us a prosperous life, or take away all our trials. Our motives may be fleshly, and yet, Jesus still speaks to us in His Word. His own disciples were the same way. They might not have been of a mind to take Jesus by force and make him King, but they surely expected Jesus to do this Himself. They followed Jesus his entire ministry with this hope in their minds, and Jesus did not send them away. He continued to teach them, until the Holy Spirit had overcome their errors and weakness. So it is that many have come to Jesus for the wrong reasons, but in hearing His Word, they remain for the right reasons.

How often have we come to church to hear the Word of God, with our own false hopes, misconceptions, and errors? Does Jesus cast us out? By no means. He has compassion upon us, and continues to teach us, until He overcomes our weakness and error. Yes, there are some, like the crowd, who are not content to hear the Word, but take matters into their own hands, and demand that God behave the way they want Him to. The Scriptures tell us we are to be separate from such people (Rom. 16:17, 2 Th. 3:14). Later on in John chapter 6, when everyone is back in Capernaum, the crowd of people tracks Jesus down again. When He tries to teach them the truth about Himself, and shows that He is not the kind of King they desired, they became greatly offended, and many who had followed Jesus abandoned Him. Jesus gladly feeds the hungry soul, but He does not force-feed it. He is the Bread of life, and gives his own flesh for the sins of the world, but this is not the bread that men are looking for. When they spit out His truth, and refuse to be nourished by it, the Lord rebukes them, but does not force them to stay. He lets them leave. He asked the twelve who remained, "Do you also want to go away?" They answered, "To whom will we go? You have the words of everlasting life. ... You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

Would we go find some other Lord? Here is Jesus, the Bread of life. Remain with Him, and He will not send you away. Even though you might have come for the wrong reason, remain with Him for the right reasons, and eat the bread of life which He gives to you by hearing every Word which He speaks to you. Let Him nourish you with the forgiveness of sins, fill you with faith and hope, and strengthen you to show the love of God among men. Amen.