

Sermon- Feeding the 12,000, the Meal with a Message

Scripture: John 6:1-13

Sunday, March 4, 2018

Last week we looked Jesus' presentation of the four witnesses to his identity. Can you name the four witnesses? Absolutely! So our journey in the Gospel of John turns back to one of these witnesses to Jesus' identity, his works which in this case is another miraculous sign. Now I have titled today's sermon, "Feeding the 12,000". If you grew up with these stories, you might wonder what I am talking about because you have always heard it as "feeding the 5000". So let me clarify right off the bat, our text clearly mentions that just the count of men were 5000. Most scholars have estimated that if there were 5000 men if you were to include the women and children, you can expect the total number of people to be about 12,000. So I decided to use the 12,000 number. But don't you find it amusing that Jesus actually had a crowd size of 12,000 and he is downplaying his crowd size. Imagine preaching this in the White House today. Just saying 😊

Anyway this miracle of the feeding of the 12,000 is the only miracle Jesus performs, besides of course His own resurrection, that is reported in all four Gospels. And when you look at the timeline of this feeding miracle in Matthew, Mark and Luke, there it is placed immediately after the 12 disciples return after their first mission trip where they were sent out to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God and heal people in the name of Jesus. They saw amazing things happen, and they were all super excited, the people they ministered to were all excited and now the disciples had just regrouped with Jesus. But as they were regrouping, all the people who were given a taste of the power of Jesus' name came looking for Jesus. So that is why you suddenly have 12,000 around Jesus. You don't see that context when you only look at the placing of this miracle in the Gospel of John. And that is because the Gospel of John has a single focus. Communicating the identity of Jesus. So in John, Jesus says if you want to know who I

am, refer to these 4 witnesses and then John is now back with witness 2, Jesus' works. I hope you understand why John is presenting his information in a different sequence than the other Gospels. But the Gospel of John also presents a lot of information not in the other Gospels. Right in this feeding miracle you have two disciples named, that you do not see in the other Gospels Philip and Andrew. Pay attention to their roles in this miracle as the story unfolds.

So when we are brought into the story in John, Jesus was sitting with his disciples on the top of a hill on the far side of the Sea of Galilee. From there, Jesus can see the crowds of people coming to him. From the other Gospels we know that he felt sorry for these people because in Jesus' eyes they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he teaches them many kingdom truths. Time passes and nobody has eaten anything in a while. Remember for 12,000 people to travel to one spot from all over the countryside traveling by foot, it would have taken them days of travel. And that is why, by the time they got to Jesus in this remote place, they would have run out of most supplies they may have packed with them when they set out on their journey. So here you have 12,000 people including woman and children all gathered to hear Jesus teach and be healed. They were also hungry and tired. In the first three Gospels, it is the disciples who actually feel the stress of the needs of this big crowd and come to Jesus to ask him to send the people back so they can go home and eat. In John, you hear the discussion introduced with the question put to Philip by Jesus. Jesus asks Philip, "where can we buy bread for all these people to eat?"

No matter which Gospel you are reading, the point remains the same. Jesus is putting the responsibility of feeding all those people onto the disciples. In all four Gospels, the story synchronizes and the most important detail of the conversation. Jesus telling his disciples, these three words, "you feed them".

Philip was the one who was probably facing Jesus at the time and the poor guy is shocked. Poor Philip. Growing up in India, you have this hospitality culture. You are always inviting people to your house and when people came, you always offered them either a meal or a snack. Arlis experienced some of this with me just yesterday when we visited an Indian home together. To do anything less would be really rude. When our family came to the US, I too used to invite people I had just met home, back in Pittsburgh. And that was always a bit of a surprise for my wife. So I learnt to be careful and I would always go and help her get ready. And after we got cell phones, I could call ahead etc. But if having to feed one or two people at short notice was a challenge, then imagine having to feed 12,000 people at short notice. So what are these disciples to do. When Philip hears “you feed them” and he starts thinking about the problem. He starts running numbers in his head and then estimates that if you have to feed all these people, well it would cost about 200 dinarii. Of course he concludes that we don’t have that kind of money so it is impossible. Andrew was standing there too and he takes a different approach. So goes out to survey the people and figure out what resources were available. From his survey he finds that from all the people he checked, only one boy had some food and all it was is 5 small barley loaves and 2 small fish. So he too gives up and says, we can’t feed these people because what we have on hand is insignificant. When Jesus hears Andrew’s report, the most amazing thing happens next. Jesus is actually satisfied with the resources available and tells Andrew, bring it to me. And then he tells the disciples to tell everybody to sit down.

So the disciples get people to sit in clusters of 50 each. That way they could count the number of groups and organize and track distribution as well.

Then Jesus takes the five loaves and says grace and starts distributing it. Then he takes the fish, does the same thing and has that distributed. They break of pieces and keep

passing the basket and the baskets don't get emptied out even after 12,000 people are feed. This my friends is the miracle of the feeding of the 12,000.

So the question we have to examine is, what is lesson Jesus is communicating here through this miracle. I think this passage is just rich with takeaways so I am going to break it into two parts. The first part is just from the perspective of the people sitting on the grass who had travelled a big distance to come and hear Jesus. So from the audience perspective, the first lesson would be, seek ye first the kingdom of God as all else will be added unto you" Remember, these people had dropped whatever else they were doing to go seek out Jesus. Jesus I am sure had taught them this principle in words and now he was teaching them by action. Jesus' own disciples never had to worry about where their food would come from the entire time they were with Jesus. Jesus wants people to know that if you place God before, your needs, God will come through for your needs. God will not ever back track on his word. Second, this miracle was to point you to the identity of the provider. Jesus wanted to communicate that, He was prophet Moses wrote about quoting God himself in Deut 15:18 ¹⁸ which said, *"I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. ¹⁹ And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.* Jesus was a prophet like Moses, in the sense that he was a type of Moses who asked God to provide manna for his people in the wilderness. But Jesus was greater than Moses because Jesus was the real provider, Moses was only the requestor.

Thirdly, Jesus was even more than the provider. He was the meal itself. To explain this aspect, we need to look at what Jesus does with the leftovers. You see when Jesus provides food for the crowd, he does not sting. You know like when you are college students and you go to an expensive restaurant and you realize the prices are too high and you have just a bit of money between everyone. This was before the time when everyone was carrying credit cards. I remember as a college student, we can calculate

how much cash we all had together and then we would strategize and figure we could order two appetizers among the 5 guys and then drinking a lot of water. In our college days we did a lot of that. But I remember leaving the restaurant feeling hungrier than when we went in, because well why do you think those things are called appetizers! 😊

Well, this meal was nothing like that. Jesus always provided a bounty and this was no exception. But unlike the bounties we sometimes have in the United States, Jesus was not cool with putting baskets of perfectly good food in the trash. So he told his disciples, “gather all the left overs so that nothing is wasted”. But I want you to pay special attention to Jesus’ words here, because the original Greek word Jesus uses for wasted is “apolemy”. Now “apolemy” actually does not mean just wasted but it conveys a much stronger meaning, something like “lost or ruined or killed”. Now I don’t like wasting food too, but by using “apolemy” Jesus is not just talking about wasting food here. What Jesus is saying should be translated as “gather the leftovers so that nothing is lost”. And what does that mean? This I believe brings us to the third point of the miracle that he wanted to crowd to see eventually. That is, the food that Jesus provides has the power to make an eternal impact. And for eternal impact it has to be consumed by people. If it is not it is like the word of God that falls on rocky soil that is blown away. Jesus is the living bread. And that living bread is not to be wasted. So that is why he asks for every bit of the left overs to be picked up and counted. Now why does he ask for the leftovers to be counted? Well, now if you look at it, there were exactly 12 baskets of left overs.

What is the significance of the number 12? I don’t usually get into numbers but sometimes numbers are part of the message and if you don’t get the significance of the number, you can miss the message so let me break it down for you. So in the Bible we have 3 that represents the perfect number for the wholeness of God in the Trinity. Then you have the number 4 that signifies the wholeness of the world God created. That is why in the garden of Eden, the river has 4 branches, the earth is spoken of as having four corners so to speak, there are 4 seasons. By the way, of the 4th day of creation, the

whole physical world was completed. So 4 is the perfect number for the material world. Now when you add 3 and 4, it is like adding God to the material world, you get 7 signifying completion. That is why God completed everything he wanted to do in 7 days. 7 simply means the perfect amount of days for God to complete the work of creation. To think of literal 7 days for creation by the way is a total misinterpretation of the meaning of the way 7 is used in Hebrew culture. Ok that was a side note. But you can also take the two perfect numbers 3 and 4 and multiply them together to give you 12. But that 12 is another number indicating completeness. That is why when God chooses 12 tribes of Israel he is indicating that God has chosen a full and perfect number of chosen people. That is the same message he is communicating when he chooses 12 apostles. You see 12 represents the full and complete number of the saved people. So when you have 12 baskets of left over gathered so that nothing is lost, Jesus is saying, the bread of life given here is not just for these people but is sufficient for all God's chosen people including you and me and none of God's chosen people will be lost because of lack of living bread. You see Jesus was think of you and me, when he gathered those 12 baskets of leftovers. Doesn't that make you satisfied in your soul thinking of that?

Ok, assuming you were one of those people who ate the bread of life and were now satisfied, and are standing in a different position. Now you are not on the grass like the crowd but one of this disciples standing around Jesus. What message do you hear? Well, the message for the disciples then is "you feed them" and "bring me what you have". If you are sitting here right now or reading this message online, and you hear, "you feed them" and "bring me what you have", what are the thoughts going through your minds right now. If you are the Argentine Mennonite congregation, who is Jesus asking us to feed? Are they the kids in our neighborhood who are in difficult home environments? Now you may say, we are already doing that. And I say, that is terrific, but if we have a God who can multiply 5 loaves and 2 fish to feed 12,000 people then maybe Jesus is

saying, maybe we are only scratching the surface of what Jesus wants us to do. See friends, Jesus is saying “bring me what you have” and it may be only 5 small loaves and 2 small fish, but the first thing that Jesus does with that small meal was to raise it up to heaven and give thanks. And after that he multiplies it and multiplies it till there is more than enough for 3 Argentines of today.

Friends, I believe God is giving us the same command today, “you feed them”. What we have may be peanuts compared to what is needed. But hear these words today. Our Lord Jesus Christ is saying to you and me, “bring me what you have”. Then he will take that, and give thanks and do the impossible. Are we ready to be part of the impossibly abundant work that God wants to do? Let us pray.