

What's in a Name? The Boy with Loaves and Fishes

July 4, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

John 6:1-15

So, we are in the middle of a series of messages titled “What’s in a Name?” where we are looking at a few of the many people woven throughout scripture whose lives tell powerful stories, and yet for one reason or another, we as the reader never get to know these people’s names. Most of them are people who are on the “outside looking in” – people without power or privilege or social standing. Women, children, foreigners, the outcast.

And up until now, a good number of our stories have been a little bit obscure. The story of the Medium at Endor. Jephthah’s daughter. Last week’s story of the Canaanite woman was a little bit more well-known. Today’s story, though, is anything but obscure. It is probably one of the best-known scriptures in all of the gospels. Or if it’s not, it should be.

I think it would be really hard to overstate just how important this story is in the New Testament. When we read the gospels of Matthew, and Mark, and Luke, and John, we start to notice pretty quickly that there is a lot of overlap between them. Different gospel writers tell a lot of the same stories, just emphasizing different parts of them based on the perspective they are writing from. Some stories are unique to one gospel or another – for example, the story of the Good Samaritan only appears in Luke’s gospel. And the story of Jesus turning water into wine is only in John. A lot of stories appear in three of the four gospels – usually Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and then John (which was written much later) just goes off and does his own thing.

But there are only *two* stories that appear in all four gospels. Two stories that all four of the gospel writers see as *so* important that they absolutely must not leave them out.

Our first impulse might be to think that these stories are the stories of Jesus’ birth, and his death. The Christmas and Easter stories. After all, these are the stories that we celebrate every year as our most sacred religious holidays.

But that’s actually *not* the case. The Christmas story only appears in Matthew and Luke. Mark and John skip right past that little detail of Jesus’s early life, and jump right to John the Baptist and the beginning of Jesus’s ministry.

So, the only two stories that appear in Matthew, *and* Mark, *and* Luke, *and* John, are the story of the Resurrection – the Easter story – and the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000. And it’s even more interesting, that the story of Jesus feeding the multitudes doesn’t just appear once, but it appears *twice* in both Matthew and Luke. Once, Jesus feeds 5,000, and once he feeds 4,000. And there’s been a lot of speculation over the years by

scholars as to whether these were two separate events – making us wonder if feeding thousands of people was maybe a semi-regular occurrence for him – or whether it was a one-time thing that was so important to the gospel writers that two of them told the same story multiple times – though it did seem to change slightly in the telling (as stories do when we tell them again and again).

So, by this point in the gospels, Jesus has been teaching and healing and going about his ministry for some time now, and word has gotten around that this is a guy you want to keep your eye on. Every time he travels to a new town he picks up a few more followers, and then a few more, and then even more. People who are just hanging on the edge of their seats, waiting to see what he does next. And because these were long before the days of radio and TV and smartphones and social media, you couldn't just go online to see a real-time livestream of Jesus's every move. If you wanted to be "in the know," you had to be there in person to see it.

And a lot of people wanted to see it. Doing the math just a bit, we are told that we have a crowd of about 5,000 people following Jesus around. But to be clear, these are 5,000 adult male heads of household. Not counted (because, evidently, they didn't count) were the women, children, and servants of these 5,000 men. So conceivably, we could have upwards of 20,000 people here in the crowd. We think that the population of Galilee at that time was somewhere in the neighborhood of 400,000, so this crowd makes up about 5% of the entire population of the country. That is enormous.

And these are excited crowds. Hopeful crowds. They're reared and ready for one more healing. One more miracle. One more run-in with a religious leader. Probably a lot of the folks in the crowd are sick themselves, trailing along behind Jesus in hopes that Jesus would heal them too. Others are people who are just waiting for Jesus to slip up and make a mistake so that they would have cause to arrest and try him. Men, women, and children; rich and poor; religious and nonreligious; slave and free – but all of them curious. All of them hopeful. All of them waiting, expectantly, for something to happen.

[Online: Incredibles clip]

And all of them, evidently, incredibly poor planners. Because, out of 20,000 people, 19,999 of them neglected to carry any food with them. It was a hungry crowd. And a hungry crowd is rarely a happy crowd, and sometimes they are just downright cranky. A "hangry" crowd – when hungry meets angry.

So. We have 20,000 hopeful yet hungry and bordering on hangry people, waiting for Jesus to do something amazing. No pressure, Jesus.

But the timing could not have possibly been worse. Matthew and Mark and Luke all tell us that Jesus has just gotten word of his cousin John the Baptist's death, and he needs a little bit of time to himself. Unfortunately, though, these crowds don't see or know or care what Jesus needs – all they care about are their own needs (their sick who need

healed; their hunger that needs satiated; their curiosity that needs resolved). And as long as they can see Jesus, no matter how many times the disciples tell them to back up and give him some space; no matter how hard they try to tell the people to go away and come back tomorrow, the crowds are still going to follow. So in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus gets into a boat where the crowds *can't* follow him so that he can take the time that he needs.

John tells it a little bit differently – that instead of getting into a boat, Jesus tries to climb a mountain to retreat from the crowds. But the crowds see him, and they try to follow him up the mountain. The disciples sort-of try to act like a buffer between Jesus and the crowds, but as they look around and see the size of the crowds, they realize that nobody is going to get any peace and quiet that night. And then the conversation turns to one of logistics.

They are trying to give Jesus a little bit of space, and so I imagine them speaking in hushed tones, doing what they can to figure everything out.

Philip: “How many people are there?”

Nathaniel: “5,000.”

Philip: “Are you sure? It looks like a lot more than that.”

Nathaniel: “Yes, I’m sure. I counted them myself. 5000 men.”

Philip: “What about women and children and servants?”

Nathaniel: “Oh. Well, I didn’t count them. They’re not our problem.”

Philip: “Um...Nathaniel, I’m not sure you understand how hunger works. Those people will need to eat too.”

Nathaniel: “Okay, well, I’m not going to go out and count again. It’s a lot of people, okay?”

And so Philip, who seems to have appointed himself as the ringleader of this circus, sends another disciple out.

Philip: “Okay, Andrew, we know that we have a ton of people. We don’t know exactly how many, because Nathaniel doesn’t know how to count. But it’s a lot. Can you go see how much food everyone has between them?”

Andrew: “Sure thing, boss!”

And so Andrew and a couple of the other disciples go out to take a poll: How many of you packed food, and how much did you carry?

And then, 30 minutes later, Andrew reports back: “There’s no food, sir.”

Philip: “What do you mean there’s no food?”

Andrew: “I mean, there’s *no food*. *Nobody* brought *anything*.”

Philip: “That can’t be true. Are you sure you asked everybody?”

Andrew: “Yep. Everybody. Every single one of them. Oh, and I got an accurate count for you. It’s 5,000.”

Philip: "Andrew, we know it's more than 5,000 people. You talked to *everybody*? Women? Children? Servants?"

Andrew: "Oh. You wanted me to ask them too?"

Philip: "Do they have brains and mouths and digestive systems?"

Andrew: "I guess so..."

Philip: "Go ask again."

30 minutes later:

Andrew: "We found food, sir!"

Philip: "Excellent! I knew you would! How much?"

Andrew: "Five dinner rolls and two trout."

Philip: "Come again?"

Andrew: "Five rolls and two fish, sir. One little boy packed his own dinner."

Philip: "Andrew, what are we going to do with that?"

Andrew: "I don't know, but here's the food."

And this is the point where Jesus interjects himself into the conversation. "I'm hungry. What's for dinner?"

And we know the rest of the story. Jesus sits the people down on the grass. He gives thanks to God and breaks the bread, then sends the disciples around to share this meager little dinner with everybody. But somehow, it is not meager anymore. Everybody takes as much as they want – as much as they can stomach, and somehow, the baskets of bread and fish keep refilling themselves. Over, and over, and over again. Until everybody has eaten to his or her heart's content.

So while all of this is going on – the disciples trying to shield Jesus from the crowd, trying to serve as last-minute party planners; trying to get an accurate count of the number of people; trying to figure out how to tend to the physical needs of this excited yet cranky mob of uninvited guests; while they are spinning their wheels trying to troubleshoot and problem solve, we have here one unsung hero who gets frequently overlooked. Matthew, Mark, and Luke don't even mention him, but John does – even if just in passing.

And that is the little boy whose food Jesus multiplies.

We know next to nothing about him. We can surmise that probably he is there alone – his parents aren't there with him. Because if his parents were there, it would be pretty likely that if they thought to pack food for him, they would have packed food for themselves too. But since he was the only one with food, we have to assume that he was flying solo. So...why? Did he even have parents? Or was he an orphan? If he did have parents, what would be so important about him being there in this huge crowd of strangers, that they would risk the dangers to send him without them, except that perhaps he himself was sick and his parents had hoped that Jesus might heal him.

Either way, whether this little guy was orphaned or sick or something else, the very fact that he is there by himself makes him *incredibly* vulnerable. He is probably more than a little bit scared. And yet, even underneath the fear, he has something that just about every grown up around him – including the disciples – are missing. And that is a belief in the impossible. When the disciples are scouring the crowd, counting the big-important grown-up people; looking for enough food for everybody to eat, completely and probably even literally looking right over the head of this little boy, the boy pulls out his meager little offering of five dinner rolls and two fish, and tugs on Nathaniel's coat tail as he passes by without even noticing the lad, and presents his precious gift as if it was going to solve the problem. As if he truly believes as only a child can that this tiny little bit of food will be enough for 20,000 hungry bellies. And as he gives away his dinner, he puffs out his chest and stands 3 inches taller. Because...maybe for the first time in his life, "I was important. I got to help."

And, God bless the disciples for humoring the child and taking his dinner to Jesus. Because as it turns out, the thing that Jesus and this little boy shared was their belief in making the impossible real. And together, the two of them feed a multitude.

My friends, somewhere along the line it seems like we as Christ followers have all but given up on expecting miracles. And instead, we have become like the disciples. Well-meaning, well-intentioned people of faith, who far too-quickly overlook the ordinary building blocks of amazing miracles in front of us. Our mind jumps immediately to the practical: "That won't work, because...(fill in the blank)."

We're too small.

We don't have enough people.

Look at what we have lost in the last year.

The need is so much bigger than we are.

We're too old.

We don't have the energy that we used to.

We don't know how.

All we have are five loaves and two fish. That's not going to cut it.

And maybe these things are all true. But the deeper truth of the kingdom of God is that it doesn't matter *what* we bring – it simply matters that we bring *what we have*. And God will take care of the rest. The kingdom of God is a place where mustard seeds become huge shade trees. Where a few grains of yeast leaven the whole loaf. Where a little boy's dinner feeds 5% of all of Galilee. Where three small churches in rural Pennsylvania have the ability to set the world on fire – if only we believe that we can.

So, my friends – let us approach the table of our Lord today with the faith of a child – knowing and believing that amazing things are in store.