

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Gifts of Jesus

(Studies in John's Gospel, leading to Easter)

Jesus, the Bread of Life

(John 6)

#1

Introduction: Signs...

Signs have one job. Their job is to deliver a clear message.

Like when you see a **STOP** sign you know exactly what to do. You stop. Signs give direction (Turn Left), explain (Children at Play), and point out things we don't want to miss (Historical Landmark).

In the same way, Jesus performed what the Bible calls "signs." These signs, like stop signs, were given to deliver a clear message.

Orient to the gospel of John...

Today, and for the next three Sundays (including Easter), we'll be looking at first-hand, eye-witness accounts of Jesus and will see "signs" that tell us who He is, show us what He's all about, and explain what all of that has to do with us.

For all of this, we are relying on the testimony of John, one of Jesus' closest friends and followers.

John's record of the life and times of Jesus revolves around seven "signs" Jesus performed that tell us what we need to know about Him. John's gospel gives us "the essential Jesus."

This morning, we turn to John, chapter 6.¹

By this point in the book, John has already given us the first three signs. He has turned water into wine at a wedding in the village of Cana (chapter 2), healed the son of a Jewish nobleman (chapter 4), and healed a man who had been paralyzed for thirty-eight years at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem (chapter 5).

Setting the scene of a miracle... (John 6:1-4)

After He healed that lame man, Jesus went straight back, north, to the region of Galilee, where the most prominent feature was (and still is) The Sea of Galilee.²

Most of His disciples were familiar with that region, and several of them with the sea, as well, being fishermen.

Mountains rise up to the east and west of the big, inland lake, and it is, from all reports, really beautiful.

John 6 is set in the beautiful spring season of the year, right before the Jewish Passover. Everything was in bloom. The weather would have been crisp and cool.

And, as Jesus walked toward those mountains bordering the Sea of Galilee, He was followed, as always, by crowds of people. And why were they were following Him? Easy. They had either heard about or had seen His miracles – and they wanted to see more.

So, in what sure seems to me to be an evasive maneuver, Jesus took His disciples up one of the nearby mountains, by themselves.

¹ The other records we have of Jesus' life (Matthew, Mark, Luke), we call *synoptic* (meaning "from one view") gospels. They were written to tell the stories of Jesus to followers who needed to know more about this Man who had given them eternal life. By contrast, John was written to those who don't know Jesus.

² The Sea of Galilee was also called "The Sea of Tiberias." In Old Testament times, it was referred to as The Sea of Chinneroth.

But the tactic didn't work. When He and His disciples got to a stopping point, they rested, looked down, and saw the crowd making its way up the mountain to find Jesus.

A Sign Given: Five Thousand Fed (vv. 5-15)

Look Who's Coming to Dinner! (vv. 5-9)

Jesus and Philip observe the obvious (vv. 5-7)

[5] So Jesus, after raising His eyes, and seeing that a large crowd was coming to Him, said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread that these people may eat?"

This question shows us something of Jesus' heart. Sure, He might have been trying to escape them, but He cared for them.

And He knew that these people were putting themselves in a dangerous position, up on a mountaintop, far away from a village where they could buy food.

We don't know much about Philip. So, we don't know why Jesus asked him and not another apostle about getting food for the crowd.

But Philip's response was pretty pragmatic.

[7]... "Two hundred denarii³ worth of bread is not enough for them, for each one to receive just a little."

Philip had a good sense of the crowd size. He might even have known how much cash was in the apostolic money bag.

And he knew that no matter how you sliced it, they didn't have the resources to feed all these people coming their way.

Another one of the apostles, Andrew (Simon Peter's brother), made an observation, one that he probably knew wasn't helpful even as he made it.

³ A denarius was roughly the daily wage of a working man.

Andrew's irrelevant report (vv. 8-9)

[8] One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, [9] "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish;⁴ but what are these for so many people?"

The point of Andrew pointing out the young boy's lunch was not to suggest a solution to the problem. It was to highlight that there was no solution to the problem.

John tells us that Jesus knew full well what He was about to do, and that His question to Philip was to ***"test him."*** (v. 6)

We never get to see Philip's report card, so we don't know if he passed the test or not.

But it is at least clear that he believed the crowd was in big trouble, with no clear solution nearby. It never seemed to dawn on him or on any of the other apostles that they were talking with the Solution.

A Miracle of Morsel Multiplication! (vv. 10-15)

Food for all! (10-14)

[10] Jesus said, "Have the people recline to eat." Now there was plenty of grass in the place. So the men reclined, about five thousand in number.⁵

Jesus immediately moved to put a plan in motion. But notice that He spoke to His disciples, not to the crowd.

The disciples would be Jesus' tools to supply the food He would provide to the hungry multitudes who had come to Him.

⁴ The barley loaves Andrew mentions here are like flattened pancakes. And the word for fish denotes a sardine-like "tidbit."

⁵ Bible scholars estimate that the total crowd, including women and children, might have been upwards of fifteen thousand people.

He commanded everyone to sit down, just like at a picnic. The whole scene is beautiful, with lush grass (and no fire ants!), cool early spring weather...but no food!

Well, hold on. Food's coming.

[11] Jesus then took the loaves and after giving thanks, He distributed to those who were reclining; likewise also of the fish, as much as they wanted.

The miracle is recorded matter-of-factly, without melodrama. No thunder in the background as I read the verse.

There was a simple prayer of thanks to the Father for His provision, and Jesus reaching for more and more fish and loaves, to give to the disciples who would give to the people until everybody had their fill.⁶

Of course, despite the fact that the Bible relates this event as a Class A miracle, some, in reading it, have concluded otherwise.

One suggestion is that this was a miracle of sharing.

That is, when the adults present saw the generosity of the little boy who was willing to share his lunch with everyone, they all got out their hidden stashes of food, so that everyone had enough to eat. (This is the version I was taught in the church of my youth).⁷

But that explanation doesn't hold water.

It doesn't explain why Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all viewed this event as so important that they all included it.⁸

The only interpretation that rings true is the one that says that Jesus actually multiplied the snackable lunch of a young boy, so that all who were present had enough - and more than enough - to eat.

[12] And when they had eaten their fill, He said to His disciples, "Gather up the leftover pieces so that nothing will be lost." [13] So they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with pieces from the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten.

And it wasn't random chance that there were twelve baskets full of leftovers, either. It was very intentional that twelve apostles collected one basket apiece.

In the years to come, Simon Peter, John, Andrew, Philip, and the rest would encounter situations of tremendous need. They would always have the memory of their own basket of leftovers to remind them that Jesus would provide.

This miraculous provision also gives us a window into the heart of Jesus. He loved the people in that crowd. He didn't scold them for coming into the wilderness without food. He saw their hunger and acted to meet their need.

And, of course, multiplying two sardines and five pancakes to feed thousands of people proves His ability to perform miracles, His power over nature.

Such a display of power was not at all lost on the multitudes. After all, they had been hungry and now they were filled. So, with bellies full, they shout out their praise.

What a great man Jesus is! (vv. 14-15)

The Prophet

⁶ The miracle of water to wine was a miracle of instant maturation. The healing at Bethesda was instant restoration. This is a miracle of instant multiplication.

⁷ Yet another interpretation is what is called the "Sacramental" view. This view says that the boys' loaves and fish was enough to give everyone a taste in this, the world's first communion service.

⁸ This is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels except Jesus' resurrection. See Matthew 14:3-21; Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:10-17. Each account includes different, but complementary details.

[14] Therefore when the people saw the sign (there's that word, "*sign*") **which He had performed, they said, "This is truly the Prophet⁹ who is to come into the world."**

They now know that Jesus is something very special. He's certainly the kind of Man they are willing to follow (as long as He keeps on filling their stomachs). They'll hang on to Jesus' coattails as He climbs to the top of the Jewish political pile.

And not only did they see in Jesus a Man who was The Prophet. He was royalty.

A king

[15] So Jesus, aware that they intended to come and take Him by force to make Him king...

They were ready for Him to rule and reign on the throne in Jerusalem. They were eager for Him to overthrow the Romans and place the Jews back in power in Israel.

You can sense the energy of the crowd toward Jesus. They recognize Him as a great man.

And, as they were cheering and applauding Jesus the Prophet / King, and as we're cheering and applauding the crowd for "getting" that Jesus was a great man, Jesus **[15b] withdrew again to the mountain by Himself, alone.**

He simply walked away. And if you're confused, I get that.

This is the kind of scene that rising leaders live for. It's a photo op for the ages, something to build on while ascending to the pinnacle of power.

But that - rising to the top - was never what Jesus was about.

And remember. This miracle wasn't an attempt to gain fame. It was a "sign." (v. 14) And signs point to something.

Whatever it was Jesus wanted the crowds to see from this sign, they didn't see.

The miracle didn't point to Him being The Prophet or to Him being a king who would restore national greatness to Israel. It pointed to something else. They missed the point of the sign, so He left.

Now, in a couple of minutes, we're going to come back and see Jesus with the crowds again. We'll listen as He makes clear what WAS the feeding of the five thousand "sign" saying.

But for now, we're going to put ourselves in the apostles' sandals. I suspect that as they watched Jesus walk away, they were disappointed, frustrated, confused, and maybe a little bit angry.

There were lots of things these guys didn't "get," but they were definitely following Jesus. They believed in Jesus. (with the exception of Judas Iscariot)

But, their faith wasn't fully formed or informed, so Jesus takes some "wet steps" to help them take "next steps."

There they all sit on the grass, with their baskets of leftovers, watching Jesus walk away from a golden opportunity to ascend to the throne.

It isn't surprising that they, too, got up and left.

Jesus "Wet Steps" Lead His Disciples to "Next Steps" (vv. 16-21)

Disciples, Sailing Away on Familiar Seas (vv. 16-18)

The disciples sail away...sans Jesus (vv. 16-17)

[16] Now when evening came, His disciples went down to the sea, [17] and after getting into a boat, they started to cross the sea

⁹ The people regarded this as a sign that Jesus was the Prophet spoken of in the Old Testament (cf. Deuteronomy 18) who would be "*like Moses.*"

to Capernaum. It had already become dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.

The thing that strikes me about this impromptu, night-time sail across the sea is that the disciples left - without Jesus.

Wouldn't it have made sense for them to have gone to Him? Don't you think it would have been friendlier for them to have waited for Jesus to make His way to the boat? Doesn't jumping up and just leaving seem weird?

It's almost like they're sending their own "sign" - *"After that missed opportunity, let Jesus find His own way back to Capernaum!"*

So, the twelve apostles went down to the sea. They all got in the same boat. Most of them being fishermen, they were comfortable on the water, and were very familiar with the Sea of Galilee.

Nothing to worry about. But troubles arose not long after they launched.

Rough seas (v. 18)

[18] In addition, the sea began getting rough, because a strong wind was blowing.¹⁰

It was getting dicey out on the lake, and this dark and stormy night on the sea was just about to get a whole lot dicier.

When they looked up from their rowing, they saw something they definitely weren't expecting.

Disciples, Fearful on Familiar Seas (v. 19)

[19] Then, when they had rowed about twenty-five or thirty stadia, they saw Jesus walking on the sea, and coming near the boat; and they were frightened.

¹⁰ Sitting at seven hundred feet below sea level, the mountains on the east and west sides of the Sea of Galilee can create a wind tunnel effect, making the storms that develop on the lake legendary for their violence.

At the point where they were crossing, the Sea of Galilee is something like 6-8 miles wide. They were slightly more than halfway across the sea when they encountered Jesus.¹¹

He wasn't in a boat and He wasn't swimming. He was walking steadily toward them on top of the waves.

Now they are afraid, but not of the storm. They were afraid of what they were just now beginning to understand about this Jesus they were following.

He spoke to them. And these first words had to be the first things He said.¹²

Disciples, Always Learning More About Jesus (v. 20)

Despite everything, I'm here (v. 20a)

[20] But He said to them, "It is I..."

"Guys, you know Me.

I'm the One who just fed thousands with next to nothing.

I'm the One who walked away from the crowd and the crown.

I'm the One from whom you sailed away.

And I'm now the One who has come back to you, the One from whom you can't get away."

And the second statement is equally important, and it had to be second. It builds on the first.

Accept My unpredictable ways (v. 20b)

¹¹ As with the feeding of the five thousand, there are those who suggest that this was not a miracle, that Jesus was merely walking on a sand bar. But the disciples - fishermen who knew the Sea well - would have known where the sand bars were. In addition, to suggest that this was not a miracle assumes dishonesty in Jesus, as He never dispelled the disciples' perception that He was performing a miracle.

¹² These are the same words Jesus spoke later on (John 8:58) when He was claiming to be the great **"I AM"** of Exodus 3, God in the flesh.

[20] “...Do not be afraid.”

They were afraid. But, again, not of the sea. They could handle the sea. What they couldn't handle was Jesus.

They left Him - and He pursued them. On the sea. Without a boat. He walks on water. Nobody does that! Only God...

It's dawning on them, while the wind was blowing, while Jesus was standing there by the boat that He was more than what they had allowed themselves to think.

Wildly unpredictable is unnerving. But sovereign over nature? God in the flesh? What do you do with that?

They processed it, accepted that the God-in-the-flesh Jesus is the same Jesus who loved and accepted them. They then took a “next step” with Jesus into faith. Their faith grew and fear was gone.

Disciples, Welcoming Jesus into Their Boat (v. 21)

[21] So they were willing to take Him into the boat; and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.

So, immediately following the feeding of the five thousand, the believing apostles grow in their faith in Jesus. Their faith matured.

The next scene involves the crowds who had eaten the fish and loaves He provided. Jesus is going to invite them to take their own “first step” into faith.

As we continue to follow Jesus, we are only one day removed from those miracles. Not surprisingly, the thousands of people whose bellies were filled by the miracle of the previous day were clamoring to find Him.

Why? Easy. They were hungry.

A Sign Interpreted: The POINT of the Miracle (vv. 26-71)

Setting the scene... Following Jesus - without really following Him (vv. 22-25)

In a sort of comic chase scene, the crowds returned to the spot where Jesus had performed the miracle the day before.

Jesus was already gone, so the crowds got in their own boats and crossed the Sea to find Him. They figured that they would get to Capernaum before He did, since the disciples left the night before in the boat without Jesus.

But when they got to Capernaum, they found Him near the city's synagogue, confused as to how He beat them there.

But, rather than asking the reasonable question, “*HOW did You get here?*” (to which He might have said, “*I walked.*”), they asked, **[25] “Rabbi, when did You get here?”**

In the three-part exchange that follows, Jesus ignored their question and told them exactly what the “sign” of the feeding of the five thousand was all about. His first words let them know that He's on to them. He knew why they came looking for Him.

Jesus Speaks to the Crowd (vv. 26-40)

#1 - Jesus invites them to believe in Him (vv. 26-29)

[26] Jesus answered them and said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate some of the loaves and were filled.”

These people had not been moved to sail to Jesus by full hearts, but by full bellies.

Not that Jesus didn't get the importance of food. Food is important. But there is food, and there is **food**.

[27] “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that lasts to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal.”

Some food is here today, gone tomorrow. (Cheetos are here today, and here tomorrow, too, but that is another story...).

The fish and loaves of the miracle were digested and gone. But there is a **food** that lasts forever. Jesus said, “**work**” for that food.

The crowd seems to be genuinely interested. They understand that Jesus is using the vocabulary of food to describe spiritual stuff.

So, they ask [28]... “**What are we to do, so that we may accomplish the works of God?**”

Great question. “*How can we do what God wants us to do?*” “*What does God want us to do?*” “*How can we please God?*”

Jesus’ answer was simple and straight to the point: [29]... “**This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.**”

Now, do you know what would have been great at this point?

It would have been great if these sign-seekers had embraced the truth of what Jesus was saying, saw the point of the sign, and believed in Him.

But that’s not at all what happened. No, instead of believing in Him, they asked Him to give them a sign. That’s right. A sign.

#2 - *Jesus invites them to believe in Him (vv. 30-36)*

[30] So they said to Him, “What then are You doing as a sign, so that we may see, and believe? What work are you performing?

[31] Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘HE GAVE THEM BREAD OUT OF HEAVEN TO EAT.’”

Twenty-four hours earlier they had watched Jesus feed them and thousands of their friends with two sardines and five pancakes. Now, they ask for a sign?

I think what’s going on is that they wanted a long-running miracle, like the forty years of provision the Jews had in the Sinai desert under Moses.¹³

Well, Jesus ran with that thought, reminding them that Moses was always only the middle man.

[32] Jesus then said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven. [33] For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven and gives life to the world.’

God was the true giver of the Old Testament manna. And that “**bread**” (the manna) was only temporary. It was life-sustaining. Jesus promises bread that is actually life-giving.

Not surprisingly, the crowd again got very interested.

[34] Then they said to Him, “Lord, always give us this bread.”¹⁴

Don’t miss this. They wanted bread, not Jesus. They were offered heaven and asked for earth. Jesus makes clear that what He was offering them was not bread. It was life. Eternal life.

[35] Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not be hungry, and the one who believes in Me will never thirst. [36] But I said to you that you have indeed seen Me, and yet do not believe.”

We very often use the vocabulary of food and drink to describe something central to our lives.

¹³ There was a popular Jewish belief that when the Messiah came, he would renew the “manna miracle” (from II Baruch, quoted from Edersheim, Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah).

¹⁴ During Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman, she made the same request when Jesus promised her “*living water*.” She said, **[John 4:15] “Sir, give me this water, so I will not be thirsty, nor come all the way here to draw water.”**

If you have a deep interest in something, you *devour* everything you can find about that topic. You *drink deeply* at the well of learning. You *gobble up* everything written by your favorite author.

Jesus is the Bread of life. The implied invitation, then and now, is to take Jesus in to our innermost being. He satisfies our deepest hungers and thirsts when we **[35] believe in Him.**

And the conversation ends with Jesus, yet again, inviting these people to believe in Him.

#3 - Jesus invites them to believe in Him (vv. 37-40)

He is the Bread of Heaven that has come to earth to do His Father's will.

Specifically, **[40] For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day."**

So, after all we have seen, what is Jesus all about? He is all about giving the gift of eternal life to people who are spiritually dead. And how does someone get eternal life?

- Well, we must work for it. And what is the work we must do? Believe in Jesus. (v. 29)
- We must eat the Bread of Heaven. And what does that mean? Believe in Jesus. (v. 35)
- We must do the will of the Father. What is the Father's will? That we believe in Jesus. (v. 40)

Conclusion:

The only way anyone will ever receive eternal life from God is if it is a gift received by faith.

It can't be earned. It's too expensive. We could never afford it.

It can't be faith + anything. To add anything to what God requires diminishes the greatness of the gift.

It has to be by faith alone in Jesus alone.

Many of the Jews who were with Jesus on that day did not believe, and therefore did not receive eternal life.

But the apostles did believe, as we hear in Peter's great confession.

[6:68] Simon Peter answered Him, "You have words of eternal life. [69] And we have already believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God."

Jesus has done all the heavy lifting. He is the Lamb of God who has now taken away your sin.

Your only work is to believe that His work was sufficient to save you. When you believe in Jesus, God gives you eternal life.

If you believe in Jesus right now, you have that life.

You can go from this place and tell your friends that if they believe in Jesus, they will receive that life.