

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Trustworthy**

#### **Gut Check**

(John 6:16-71)

Study #5

#### **Introduction: A world of cliches...**

Over the last two weeks of the Olympics in Italy, we've watched world-class athletes dig deep - even with their backs against the wall. They have come through in the clutch, and they've have knocked their ice-skating dances and their snowboarding acrobatics out of the park.

We've seen hockey games where the rubber meets the road, nail biters, and barn-burners. The winning team has delivered the knock-out punch, driven the last nail in the coffin, and has taken the wind out of their opponent's sails.

Yes, the world of sports is a world of clichés.<sup>1</sup>

We hear some of sports' most famous clichés in the middle of the final period when a team either rises to the occasion (there's one), or they don't.

Commentators tell us, *"It's crunch time, do or die. They're behind the eight ball. This is for all the marbles. There's no tomorrow."* And in these win-or-lose scenarios, you might hear *"It's gut check time."*

A *"gut check"* comes to an athlete when the athlete faces a test in competition to give it his all...or go home.

But *"gut checks"* also come to students, married couples, soldiers, and everyone with a challenging job. They come when the test involves commitment or courage or faith.

Over the next half hour, we'll see the crowds that followed Jesus and the twelve apostles face faith and commitment *"gut checks."* And we may well face our own *"gut checks"* as we watch them face theirs.

Last Sunday, we saw the fourth of Jesus' *"signs"* that signaled that He was *"the Christ, the Son of God."* (John 20:31)

Up on the slopes of a mountain overlooking the Sea of Galilee, He multiplied two small fish and five small loaves of bread to feed thousands of hungry people.

And we'll come back shortly to see Jesus interact, again, with some of the people from that crowd. Today, we'll come to better understand what the feeding of the five thousand *"sign"* said.

First, though, we'll follow Jesus' apostles as they made their way from the feeding spot down to the Sea on our way to seeing a fifth *"sign."*

I suggested last Sunday that the people who watched Jesus walk away from them, going further up the mountain when they tried to make Him king, were deeply disappointed in Jesus.

As I've spent time in today's stories, I've wondered if maybe the apostles were at least frustrated and confused with Jesus.

He had multiplied food that fed thousands - and it didn't end with what would have seemed to them to have been a kingdom win. He still wasn't wearing a crown and Rome still dominated Israel.

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<sup>1</sup> And this is to ignore so many others: they're off to the races, hitting on all cylinders, running like a well-oiled machine putting on a clinic, going for the

jugular; they've answered the bell; they're back on their heels, on the ropes; never say die; it isn't over till the fat lady sings.

These guys were definitely following Jesus, and they believed in Him (all except Judas) But there was a lot about Jesus they still didn't yet "get."

So, to help them "get it," Jesus will lead them into some "next steps" by taking some "wet steps."

There they were, watching Jesus walk away up the mountain as they each held on to their baskets of leftover fish and loaves.

### **Jesus' "Wet Steps" Lead His Disciples to "Next Steps" (6:16-21)**

#### **Disciples, COMFORTABLE on Familiar Seas (6:16-18)**

*The disciples sailed away...without 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 to Capernaum. It had already become dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.**

What struck me as I read this was that they didn't wait for Jesus to show up before setting sail.

For one thing, I would have expected that when He went up the mountain, they - His "followers" - would have followed Him. But they didn't. As well, it would have seemed at least friendlier for them to have waited for Jesus.

Wait for Him to make His way back to them before pushing. Jumping into the boat and sailing away, without Jesus, just seems...odd.

I don't want to make too much of this, but it's almost as if they're sending their own "sign" to Jesus, as in, "After that missed opportunity, let Jesus find His own way back to Capernaum!"

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<sup>2</sup> The Sea of Galilee sits at seven hundred feet below sea level, making it the lowest freshwater lake on earth. Mountains on the east and west sides of the lake create a wind tunnel effect, making the storms that develop legendary for their violence.

I'll admit that's conjecture. But twelve men got into the same boat to sail across back to Capernaum. Not thirteen.

With a few of the disciples being fishermen, they were comfortable on the water. Nothing to worry about. But it wasn't calm sailing.

*Rough seas (v. 18)*

**[18] In addition, the sea began getting rough, because a strong wind was blowing.<sup>2</sup>**

It was a dark and stormy night on the water - and things were about to get a whole lot stormier.

#### **Disciples, FEARFUL on Familiar Seas (6:19)**

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

At the point where they were probably crossing (near the northern end), the Sea of Galilee is about six to eight miles across. They were roughly halfway across the sea when they saw Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

He wasn't in a boat and He wasn't swimming. He was walking steadily toward them on top of the waves, "**and they were frightened.**"

But they had not been frightened while battling the storm on the water.

They were now frightened by what they were beginning to understand about this Jesus they were following.

While on the water, He spoke to them. Two messages.

<sup>3</sup> As with the feeding of the five thousand, there are those who say that this was not a miracle, that Jesus was merely walking on a sand bar. But...the fishermen among the disciples would have known where the sand bars were AND to suggest that this was not a miracle is to accuse Jesus of dishonesty.

### Disciples, Growing in Faith in a Trustworthy Jesus (6:20)

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

**[20] But He said to them, "It is I..."<sup>4</sup>**

*"Guys, you know Me. I'm the One...*

*...who just fed thousands with next to nothing to work with.*

*...who walked away from the crowd and the crown.*

*...from whom you sailed away.*

*...who has come back to you.*

*...from whom you can't get away."*

Then He said this.

*Accept My unpredictable ways (v. 20b)*

**[20] "...Do not be afraid."**

He saw their fear. And again, it was not of the storm on the sea. They could handle the sea. What they couldn't handle was this Jesus.

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

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

Wildly unpredictable is one thing. That is unnerving and they experienced that at the wedding in Cana and with the cleansing of the temple.

But sovereign over nature? What do you do with that?

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> Different Gospel accounts will include different details. Matthew includes the detail of Peter walking out to Jesus on the water, sinking, being rescued by Jesus,

### Disciples, Welcoming Jesus into Their Boat (6:21)

**[21] So they were willing to take Him into the boat; and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.<sup>5</sup>**

They are processing what to do with who they now understood Him to be.

They were taking this "next step" into accepting that this Jesus they had believed in was God-in-the-flesh.

We keep watching as their constantly growing faith will be stretched again in another setting and in a very different way.

This next setting brings the crowds who had eaten the fish and loaves the day before back onto the stage. They were looking for Jesus, and we aren't surprised.

And why were they looking for Jesus? Easy. They were hungry.

**Interlude: The crowds look for Jesus in all the wrong places... (6:22-25)**

It was a small portion of the crowd of thousands that had been fed fish and loaves one day earlier who returned to the same spot on this day after.

Jesus wasn't there, so, in a near comic chase scene, they piled into their own small boats and crossed the Sea to find Him.

They arrived at Capernaum and found Him near the synagogue.

But they were confused because they knew Jesus hadn't gotten into the boat with His disciples when they left the day before.

and being rebuked by Jesus for his little faith. The disciples worshiped Him. Mark records that Jesus was intending to walk on by them.

Given that, they asked, ***“When did You get here?”*** The more reasonable question would have been, *“HOW did You get here?”*

Jesus shows here that for every inappropriate question, there is a fitting response.

### **Jesus - The Bread Of Life (6:26-58)**

#### **Jesus Claims to be “The Bread of Life” (6:26-40)**

*Jesus invites them to trust Him (vv. 26-29)*

We might have expected Him to respond to their question with, *“Well, if you must know, I walked.”*

But no. Right out of the gate, He engaged with them. He scolded them. He called them out.

***[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.”***

They should have seen the miracle of the fish and loaves as an indicator - a ***“sign”*** - of who Jesus was. Messiah. Son of God.

But all they saw was bread. They had sailed to find Jesus not because of full hearts, but because of empty bellies. And Jesus wanted them to take interest in something way meatier.

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

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

The fish and loaves of the previous day’s meal were already gone. But there is a ***“food”*** (think *sustenance*) that lasts forever.

This crowd seemed to be genuinely interested. They *“got”* that Jesus was using the vocabulary of food to address matters weightier than food.

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

It was a great question, and one that Jesus was happy to answer.

***[29]...“This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.”***

How simple and how clear. *“Do’ the not-doing thing. Believe. Only believe in Me.”*

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

It would have been great if these sign-seekers had seen the truth of what Jesus was saying, recognized Him as the Messiah because of His miracles and His teaching - and had believed in Him.

But that wasn’t at all what happened. They understood that Jesus was inviting them to believe in Him for eternal life.

And rather than believe, they asked Him to give them a sign.

*When seeing is NOT believing! (vv. 30-36)*

***[30] So they said to Him, “What then are You doing as a sign, so that we may see, and believe You? 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.’”***

Isn’t that weird? Twenty-four hours earlier they had seen the amazing ***“sign”*** of the two sardines and five pancakes, multiplied. So, why ask now for a ***“sign”***?

I think, upon some pondering, that these Jews were demanding that Jesus repeat the wilderness experience of their ancestors.

They were asking Jesus to be a “*new and improved Moses*” who would give them forty years - or more! - of multiplied fish and loaves.<sup>6</sup>

But Jesus made a distinction between the provision God gave in the wilderness under Moses and what He was offering.

**[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.”**

Minor point #1: Moses was only the middle man. It was God, not Moses, who gave the Jews manna in the wilderness.

Minor point #2: The bread God gave in the days of Moses was used up at the end of every day. It only sustained life.

MAJOR POINT: The bread Jesus promises - different from the bread He gave them twenty four hours earlier - rather than only sustaining life, actually gives life.

Now the crowd was really interested, but tragically, for the wrong bread.

**[34] Then they said to Him, “Lord, always give us this bread.”<sup>7</sup>**

His listeners asked for earth. Jesus was offering them heaven.

**[35]...“I am the bread of life;<sup>8</sup> the one who comes to Me will not be hungry, and the one who believes in Me will never be thirsty. [36] But I said to you that you have seen Me, and yet you do not believe.”**

That last comment is a helpful commentary on the power of miracles.

I think that we’re tempted to think that if we could just see a miracle, we’d believe - “*Lord, clear University Hospital with a healing word and we’ll believe!*”

Not so fast...

Look at the periods in biblical history when most of the world’s miracles occurred, and you’ll notice that faith did not materially grow.

- During the days of Moses, the Jews received manna from heaven for forty years. And we know that generation mostly for faithless grumbling, and for refusing the Promised Land when God offered it to them.
- The prophets Elijah and Elisha performed many miracles in their day. Those miracles sure didn’t spark a revival but were marked by wickedness under the reigns of King Ahab and Jezebel.
- The days of Jesus and the early apostles were days of miracles...and the people rejected Jesus and persecuted many of the first disciples.

The people we meet in John 6 saw a miracle - and they did not believe. They enjoyed the miracle but refused to accept what the miracle told them about the Miracle-Worker.

The conversation continued, and the food theme that kicked the whole thing off on the previous day serves as the thread holding together the scene at the miracle and this conversation.

There, it was multiplied fish and loaves. Here, Jesus claimed to be “*the Bread of Life.*”

<sup>6</sup> There was a popular Jewish belief that when the Messiah came, he would renew the “manna miracle” from the wilderness era. (from II Baruch). And remember that they called Jesus “*the Prophet*” - the one predicted by Moses who would be a leader of the Jews just like Moses was. (See Deuteronomy 18)

<sup>7</sup> Remember Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman. She made almost the same request when Jesus promised her “*living water.*” (John 4:15)

<sup>8</sup> Allegories are only meaningful when allowed to stand in their symbolic subtlety. They become either gross or silly when pressed to literalness. In other places, Jesus said, “*I am the door*” and “*I am the vine*” and “*I am the light of the world.*” The power of metaphor lies in their suggestion of a deeper reality while not losing the original mage of the concrete and actual.

Jesus was having a food-centric talk with these people - on two levels.

And we get that, because we use food and drink to speak about what we ingest at meals AND about what “fills us up” - emotionally, psychologically, or spiritually.

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.

A couple of Sundays ago, we heard Jesus say, **[John 3:16] “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life.”**

Here, Jesus is giving a powerful word picture to help us understand **“believe.”**

When we believe, we take Jesus into our innermost being. We take Jesus as our sustenance. We ingest His truth.

He was promising them that He alone could satisfy their spiritual hunger and thirst. But they weren't biting.

In fact, now that Jesus has made Himself more plain, instead of a chorus of faith we hear a chorus of grumbles.

### **Jesus Promised Spiritual Sustenance (6:41-51)**

**[41] So then the Jews were complaining about Him, because He said, “I am the bread that came down out of Heaven.”**

As soon as He called on them to believe in Him / to receive Him, their interest in following Him turned to resistance.

They wanted to follow Him IF that meant liberation from Rome and the arrival of an earthly Kingdom. They weren't about to believe in Him if He wasn't going to usher in an earthly kingdom now.

They rehearsed Jesus' pedigree and found Him...uncompelling.

**[42] And they were saying, “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does He now say, ‘I have come down out of Heaven?’”<sup>9</sup>**

As the discussion continued, a pattern emerged.

- Jesus consistently presented Himself as the source of Life; His audience increasingly resisted His claims.
- He used increasingly hard - even grotesque - language to get His message across; His audience stiffened their necks and hardened their hearts.

And Jesus, who understood rejection when He saw it, turned to speak to them in ways that only served to harden them in their rejection.

Here is much of what follows, paraphrased:  
*“Stop this grumbling, guys. If you want to come to God, you've got to come to Him through Me. I'm the One who will bring you back to life after you die, at the end of all time. If you knew anything about the Father, you would come to Me because I'm the only One who has ever seen God the Father face to face, eye to eye. Like I said, I am the Bread of Life, and the 'bread' that I give for the life of the world is My flesh.”* (vv. 43-51)<sup>10</sup>

And the crowd shot back, **[52] How can this man gives us His flesh to eat?”**

To which Jesus replied, *“Yep. You've got to eat (literally, “gnaw”) My flesh and drink My blood if you want eternal life.”* (vv. 53-58)<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> By calling Him **“the son of Joseph”** we hear a veiled reference to Jesus' supposed scandalous conception.

<sup>10</sup> Jesus has turned to cryptic speech to avoid heaping judgment on these Jews.

<sup>11</sup> Just as in the teaching of the parables, Jesus' words here are intended to drive away people who have already rejected the truth. (See Matthew 13:10-15)

We have already seen that for these crowds, seeing (a miracle) WAS NOT believing. Now, Jesus says that eating IS believing!

Jesus was using the vocabulary of the dinner table to speak of faith, of receiving and ingesting His truth.<sup>12</sup>

But, the audience, having already rejected His invitation to believe, sees these final invitations as only crude and coarse.

We know that this conversation took place in Capernaum, a city set on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. A small portion of the huge crowd from the day before had chased Jesus across the Sea. And they were talking at - or near - the Capernaum synagogue.<sup>13</sup>

And three times, you'll notice that John identified these people who were gathered at the synagogue as "**His disciples.**" (vv. 60, 61, 66)

The use of that word to describe the people in the crowd might surprise you. But, depending on the context, that word - "disciple" - has a very elastic range of meaning.

It literally translates as "a learner."

And sometimes...

...a disciple is a serious-minded, thoroughly committed, believing-in-Jesus follower.

...a disciple is an immature beginner in the life of following Jesus.

...a disciple is a follower who doesn't believe. (Judas Iscariot)

...a disciple is a curious outsider.

When reading the Gospels, we don't equate "**disciple**" with "**believer.**" To do so makes much of the Gospels unintelligible.

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<sup>12</sup> This idea that believing = eating was introduced in the Prologue of John's Gospel when John wrote, **[John 1:12] But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.**

Receiving = eating = believing.

<sup>13</sup> We are not to suppose that there was a mega-synagogue in Capernaum that sat thousands, or that every person who had been present at the feeding of the 5,000 was present in Capernaum. Think hundreds or maybe even dozens.

Jesus gave this larger group of disciples a faith "*gut check.*" He challenged them to examine the evidence (the "*sign*") and His truth claims - and believe, receive Him, ingest Him. They didn't.<sup>14</sup>

### **Gut Checks In Capernaum (vv. 60-66)**

#### **The Crowds Faced a FAITH Gut Check (6:60)**

***[60] Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, "This statement is very unpleasant; who can listen to it?"***

Keep the food theme going and think of some foods that you don't like. You find them distasteful. Unpleasant. (Mine would include cauliflower and liver.)

Well, Jesus' invitation to these disciples to take a "*next step*" into faith sounds as unappealing as that noxious food sounds to you.

They understood what Jesus was saying when He said, "*Eat My flesh and drink My blood.*" They knew full well He meant, "*Believe in Me. Receive Me.*"

And they walked away. But as they walked away, He called out to reach them one last time.

***[61] But Jesus, aware that His disciples were complaining about this, said to them, "Is this offensive to you? [62] What then if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before? [63] It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh provides no benefit; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit, and are life. [64] But there are some of you who do not believe."***

<sup>14</sup> Remember, Jesus had already passed His own "*gut check.*" The crowds were convinced that Jesus was the sort of leader who would restore Israel's glory and would meet all of their needs. He refused their offer of a crown, just as He had passed this test once before, when Satan offered Him all the Kingdoms of the earth (Matthew 4).

Their response to Jesus' final invitation? **[66] *As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore.***

Allowing Jesus to fill their bellies with food, they failed the faith "*gut check*" The crowds saw all they needed to see of a trustworthy Jesus...and still wouldn't believe in Him.

That's a cautionary tale to those who know He is trustworthy and refuse to believe in Him.

If that is you, today, don't be like those in the crowd at Capernaum. Jesus is utterly trustworthy.

Believe in Him for eternal life today and begin the great adventure of life with Jesus.

Our story isn't over yet. John includes one final scene to let us see that on that day, the Twelve faced their own "*gut check*."

### **The Twelve Faced a FOLLOWING Gut Check (6:61-71)**

They have watched as the numbers following Jesus had dropped from as much as twenty-thousand to a couple hundred, to next to nothing over the course of twenty-four hours.

That must have been sobering, really challenging.

And with the crowds gone, Jesus had a question for the Twelve.

**[67]... "*You do not want to leave also, do you?*"**

It was an honest question. And the fact that Jesus asked it tells us that there was a choice to be made.

Jesus forced the issue on these believing men (all were believers except Judas) by asking the question.

The question tells us that believers can wander off, stray into darkness, and stop walking with Jesus.

When they do, they don't lose eternal life, aren't unredeemed or unjustified. But believers can stop following. It's a tragedy and it happens.

When it happens that a believing disciple stops following, he loses intimacy with Jesus, loses the fulness of the abundant life Jesus offers, and loses a rich inheritance in a kingdom that hasn't yet come.

But that wasn't what happened on this day with these disciples.

**[68] *Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. [69] We have already believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God."***

Jesus' question and Peter's answer may provide the "*gut check*" your soul needs today.

You believe in Jesus. Have you stepped back from following Jesus with your whole heart, from giving yourself to His command to make disciples, and from leading a life marked by love?

If you have, what will you do today, now that you have remembered His utter trustworthiness?

Peter was right. There really is no one like Jesus.

He alone is worthy of your worship, your obedience. He alone is the source of purpose and meaning. Give to Him all that you can give: Yourself.