

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 07/25/2021



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Ninth Sunday After Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, July 25th

John 6:1-21

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Kingdom economics

The lectionary shifts from Mark for a five-Sunday journey through the crucial sixth chapter of John's Gospel. This week focuses on two signs: The feeding of the five thousand (6:1-15) and Jesus walking on water (vv.6-21). When taken together, these signs are a progressive revelation of the identity of Jesus. If the miraculous feeding has allusions to manna from heaven in Exodus, the text culminates in Jesus referring to Himself by the name that God himself revealed to Moses. Jesus is God. Besides the huge Christological and theological implications of this text, there are also practical applications for faith and life and how Kingdom economics contrast greatly from those of the world.

John 6:1-21 Commentary

With the change of Gospel comes a different set of circumstances. John leaves no doubt as to why he wrote His Gospel: *"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name"* (John 20:30-31). The lectionary this week contains two of those signs. The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels (Matthew 14.13-21; Mark 6.31-44; Luke 9b.10-17; John 6.1-15).

¹ After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. ² And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. ³ Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples.

"After this" refers to an unspecified period of time since the previous events recorded in chapter 5 (the healing at the pool on the Sabbath and the ensuing conflict with "the Jews"). This period could be as much as six months. In v.2, the reason why the crowd was following Jesus is clearly stated: *"because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick."*

⁴ Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. ⁵ Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" ⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do.

The large crowd attracted to Jesus contrasts with His rejection in Jerusalem presented in the previous chapter. Unlike the synoptic Gospels where the feeding miracle is initiated by the disciples asking Jesus to dismiss the

crowds so that they may buy provisions, it is Jesus who initiates the process in John's Gospel by testing Philip. In the synoptics it is Jesus who challenges the disciples to give the crowds something to eat.

⁷ Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little."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, but what are they for so many?"

In vv.7-9, Philip and Andrew both think in human terms. Their responses are consistent with any manager in a modern organization. When Jesus asked him where they were to buy food for so many, Philip does a cost assessment. A denarius was a day's wage for a laborer. To Philip, the cost was prohibitive. Andrew, on the other hand, looks at the meagre resources they already have and finds a boy with five loaves and two fish - "*but what are they for so many?*" The poor typically ate bread made from barley whereas the rich ate bread made from wheat.

¹⁰ Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted.

Jesus had the people sit down on the grass – the allusion here to Psalm 23:2 and laying down in green pastures. John specifies five thousand men (*andres* – men, not the generic *anthrōpoi*). There could have been more than ten thousand people. Jesus took, gave thanks, and distributed the loaves and fishes to the people. The people ate as much as they wanted. This has allusions to Exodus 16:21 and how as much manna was gathered as was needed. There are clear connections with Moses giving the bread of heaven. Later Jesus identifies Himself as the actual "*Bread of Life*" (6:35) and how He is the "*Living Bread*" that came down from heaven and will give His flesh for the world (6:51).

¹² And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." ¹³ So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten. ¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"

Some argue there are theological reasons for the reference to twelve baskets of fragments of the barley loaves. Perhaps it is a reference to Micah 5:1-9 where God promises to save a remnant of the twelve tribes through His ruler from Bethlehem? The people now associate Jesus with the prophet referred to by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15-18 – "*The Lord God will raise up a prophet like me...*" (v.15).

¹⁵ Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Participating in yet another Jewish uprising against the Romans and their appointed puppet rulers is not part of Jesus' agenda.

¹⁶ When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, ¹⁷ got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.

Jesus must have given His disciples instructions to leave without Him and He would meet them in Capernaum.

¹⁸ The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹ When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. ²⁰ But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." ²¹ Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.

In the context of the prior verses where the crowd view Jesus as the Prophet who Moses wrote about; these next four verses elevate Jesus even further. As Jesus walks on the water and approaches the boat, His words, “*It is I...*” (*egō eimi*) are the Septuagint’s rendering of God’s self-identification in Exodus 3:14: “*I AM WHO I AM.*” The connection becomes clearer with multiple such references beginning at 6:35 onwards. This is an indication of Jesus’ divinity. Jesus walks on water as the *I AM WHO I AM* parted the Red Sea. There are further allusions to the redemption of the Israelites at the Red Sea as the disciples are rescued from their plight and brought immediately and safely to the other shore.

Reflection

While there is much theological revelation in these verses, there is more here than theological learning for the intellectually curious. There are also practical applications on Kingdom living.

Three points stand out from John’s account of the feeding of the five thousand:

First, assessments of a situation that are grounded in human limitations are irrelevant when Jesus is in charge. Both Philip and Andrew had reasonable responses. Philip provided a cost assessment of what it would take to do what his Master told him to do, and Andrew conducted a resource audit and found what they had was grossly insufficient for the task at hand. Philip must have known about God raining down bread from heaven, yet he failed the test Jesus set for Him. How many churches and ministries are limited by thinking like Philip and Andrew? Doing things in good order must also leave room for the Holy Spirit to operate. Decisions must include faith as well as recommendations from accountants and managers. We have heard of God raining down bread from heaven and how Jesus fed the five thousand. What is our excuse?

Second, according to John, the purpose of such signs was to encourage belief. Yet John states how the crowds followed Jesus because of the signs. After this sign of the miraculous feeding, the crowds want Jesus to be their king – never mind listening to what Jesus actually said and taught. It seems the crowds were drawn by the entertainment and driven by worldly concerns over spiritual ones. This is a challenge today for churches who rely significantly upon entertainment and satisfying consumer needs. In case we forget, Jesus’ plan was to develop a small group of committed disciples, not convert the crowds.

Third, regardless of any possible theological connections with the twelve baskets of bread fragments collected after the feeding, if Jesus can produce bread in abundance at will, why collect the scraps of bread in the first place? Perhaps this gives us some insight into Kingdom economics: God provides enough, people share, nothing is wasted, all are satisfied. How different this is from human economics: The earth is exploited, people hoard, the waste is appalling, only a privileged few are satisfied while others starve! The irony is that those who have excess often live unhealthy and unfulfilled lives chasing possessions. Another irony today is that many of the most powerful organizations involved in the hunger business are incentivized to keep finding hungry people, some to the point of manipulating census data. Irradicating hunger would be disastrous to such organizations.

The pericope of Jesus walking on water and the revelation of His divinity is again more than a theological truth – the practical implications for our lives are also captured in His words: *Do not be afraid*. Jesus is God.

