

FEEDING OF THE 5000

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Date: 13-03-2024

Scripture: John 6:1-13

We've been in a sermon series of the signs from the gospel of John. The 'Turning of Water into Wine', 'The Healing of the Royal Man's Son', and then last week, 'The Healing of the Man at the Pool'. Today, the feeding of the 5000.

Before I go there, we've been looking at all of these verses with the fact that this is a sign; otherwise it would have been referred to as a miracle here. I was trying to understand what the difference between a sign and a miracle was, to get a context. I found quite a few definitions, but something stood out which I would like to share here. The dictionary says that a miracle is a phenomenon that cannot be explained by known laws of nature. According to the Bible, a miracle is a supernatural occurrence that goes against the laws of nature. We expect miracles in various situations in our lives.

But when we look at the gospel of John, he uses the word 'sign'. And signs, miracles and wonders, though used interchangeably, there is a very stark difference with what sign means. Sign is whatever points to a deeper revelation. Sign is not the revelation itself. It indicates that something greater will soon develop. A sign is a mark, an indication or a token. It is not the sign itself that will get the greatest attention; the attention or the focus will eventually be on what was being pointed to. And so, I think with that context, we can appreciate why John uses the word 'sign' in these seven signs that he has described in the gospel of John.

John 6:1-13

6 ¹ After these things Jesus went over the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. ² Then a great multitude followed Him, because they saw His signs which He performed on those who were diseased. ³ And Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat with His disciples.

⁴ Now the Passover, a feast of the Jews, was near. ⁵ Then Jesus lifted up His eyes, and seeing a great multitude coming toward Him, He said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?" ⁶ But this He said to test him, for He Himself knew what He would do.

⁷ Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little."

⁸ One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, ⁹ "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two small fish, but what are they among so many?"

¹⁰ Then Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. ¹¹ And Jesus took the loaves, and when He had given thanks, He distributed them to the disciples, and the disciples to those sitting down; and likewise of the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² So when they were filled, He said to His disciples, "Gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing is lost." ¹³ Therefore they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten.

Let's pray;

Father Lord, we thank you for your Word. We pray Jesus, that just as John intended it to be a sign to a greater revelation, that we would today glean from it to know much more deeper about You, Lord,

that we would have a greater understanding to the person of Jesus. And Father Lord, that we would draw real life applications from it. We commit this time into your hands. Speak to us, Lord. in Jesus' most precious name, we pray.

I'm sure each one of us has gone through this chapter quite often. Probably it's a scene that can easily be construed as a wow moment. It can be always said that "Wow! Jesus managed to feed 5,000 men with just 5 loaves of bread and fish. It doesn't talk about the women and children, so the count must have been quite high. It would be at least 20,000 odd people. And it can be an instance where we can just be amazed at a miracle that occurred. Jesus could do something to overcome the hurdle of how to feed these people. But as I said, there is a purpose that John calls it a sign. John usually does not repeat stories that Matthew, Mark or Luke have written. But somehow, this one gets repeated. I think it is quite real and important that John sees it significant enough that it needs a specific mention once again.

From the start, we see that Jesus moved on across the Sea of Galilee. I'm sure He must have taken a boat, and many of the other people, the multitude that was there, followed Him. The Bible says that the great multitude followed Him because they saw His signs which He had performed among those who were ailing. The Message version actually puts it like this: *A huge crowd followed Him, attracted by the miracles they had seen Him do among the sick.* So, it was not that they were looking at the person of Jesus and following Him because they were in awe of this person. Some commentaries put it as thrill seekers who failed to grasp the true significance of Jesus and the signs that He did.

And they flocked to see His works but refused to accept His words. Typical of showmanship, typical of a magician of today that people would go to just see a wow moment. And that was the situation here. The people were just going to see, possibly catch a glimpse. I'm sure not all of the 5,000 or the 20,000 were ailing. Not all of them were blind or lame or sick. Few of them must have actually gone for the right reason, hoping to get that touch from Jesus, but the majority of them were just going to see what was going to be new today. They had been seeing it happen. So, they must have been running along the shore; some might have had the advantage of a boat to follow Him. And eventually, when Jesus reaches onto the other side, He sees this multitude of people approaching Him.

As far as the Bible goes, the problem of people being attracted by signs and miracles or the wondrous work that Jesus did, was a very old problem. In fact, John 2:23-25 *"Now, while He was in Jerusalem at the Passover festival, many people saw the signs He was performing and believed in His name. but Jesus would not entrust Himself to them, for He knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for He knew what was in each person."*

Very clearly, there was something not deep; it was very superfluous. And in fact, Jesus condemns this act in John 4:48 *He says, "Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe."* That's very common even today. We all, somehow or the other, want to look for some miraculous display of God's presence. We want to see God come through circumstances in our work or in finances or relationships; and we kind of expect that from Him. While thankfully, we also believe in Jesus, we expect this aspect of revelation also at times. I'm not sure whether it is the right expectation or not, but I think it's not harmful when we ask our Father to do something for us which we are probably incapable of.

But that was not the case then. They did not believe in His words. They just witnessed the works. Jesus saw this. I'm sure, having the background of how these people behaved and followed Him for the thrill, it would have been intimidating to suddenly see 20,000 people charging up the mountainside at Him. But Jesus, being the person that He was, was full of compassion. He looked at

Philip and said, "What shall we do to feed them? Where can we get bread that they may be fed?" Now there are responses here. The Bible says in v. 6, "*but this He said to test him for He Himself knew what He would do.*" That's very typical. Jesus knew what was the solution to the problem. He knew what needed to be done. But here, He suddenly turns to the disciples and tests them. And He asks Philip. Why did He ask Philip? He didn't ask any of the disciples. He just turned to Philip and said, "Where can we get bread that we could feed them?" Basically, how are we going to handle the situation?

Response 1:

Now, Philip was somebody who lived very close by in a small town in Bethsaida, which was not far off. So it was probably expected that Philip would have the answers to all the D-marts and the bakeries nearby, where he could get bread and pastries. It's probably late in the evening. We make some calls and get the stuff ready to get to these people. But what did Philip do? Philip suddenly started analyzing the situation. He started running calculations in his mind. Now for Jesus, Philip was not the answer. For Jesus, the knowledge that Philip would have had about the stores and the outlets where he could get the provisions was not the answer.

Probably Jesus wanted a response which would show the weakness or the inability to handle the situation and look at a response which would manifest God's power. But instead, Philip being the man he is, thought that he had the answers and started his mental calculations. He says, "200 denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have little." Now, 200 denarii was almost eight months wages; a denarius was a day's wage. Comparing it to today, it was like eight months of your salary that is being put on the table in order to feed the 5,000 or 20,000 people.

And somehow, that's our response as well. Whenever we land up in a situation, we immediately open our cheque book, log into our bank accounts. Do we have the money to deal with the situation? Do I have the ability to handle this? Do I have the resources to take care of this? We often fail to look above. We always look around. And that's what Philip was probably doing.

And here's the problem. When we start to analyze, we begin to paralyze. We don't have the solution. Whenever a situation of this kind comes up, which is overwhelming, and when we fail to see the solution which comes from above, and we look at the options that we have, we will probably not get rid of the problem. We'll probably just tide over situations minute by minute. The problem is not resolved. And this was the first failure where Philip responded in a very analytical manner, saying that we don't have the money. We'll need to raise more money to resolve the situation.

Response 2:

There is a parallel response which is recorded in Mark 6: 35-36, which narrates this event too. the response there is: Let's get rid of the problem. What did they say? By this time, it was late in the day, so His disciples came to Him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." Basically, why bother feeding them? Let them go back and find their own food. I have shared this story from my sailing days with you. Sometimes, immigration would not grant permission to disembark; it was August 15th. When I asked one of them the reason, he said, "We need to do a security check. That's too much trouble and I don't want to do that. so I don't grant shore leave. Nobody goes, no problem." Situation resolved.

The response here was that of ignorance, not lack of intelligence. Ignore the problem. Let's just get rid of them. If they are not there, we don't have to feed them. No people to feed, no problem to solve. This was one of the responses. That's also very typical of what we might do today. We might

try to avert a situation by just ignoring it. If it's not there, I don't have to deal with it. We like to skirt around the issue. That's the second response where they failed.

Response 3:

In 6:5, Andrew says, "We have little." One would think that here comes a guy with some resource in his hand. But suddenly he is overshadowed with doubt. "But will it be enough? It's a response of potential possibility but overcast by shadow – I have this means, but can I deal with the situation with this? He says, "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two small fish, but what are they among so many?" And that is something that we also end up doing many times. We have a possibility of a solution, we know we can probably take it forward, but then we are pulled back by doubt. We are pulled back by the chains of, or the stronghold of not being positive about it. We fail to see that it's not us in that situation. We fail to see that every situation is in God's perfect plan. So, even if we see a small resource that is possibly a solution, we fail to see that God can use that.

Response 4:

This is probably the best response when it comes to adversity or situations like this – it's that of interdependence. It is seeing the minuscule resource you have, and seeing the awesome, mighty, powerful God that you have, you connect the two. And God can do wondrous, miraculous thing, take it leaps and bounds beyond our comprehension when it comes to even the smallest thing in our hand.

What did God say to Moses? "What do you have in your hand?" He said, "I just got my walking stick." "Great! We're going to use that, and you're going to take Israel out of Egypt." And that walking stick did its wonders of bringing water out of the stone, parting the Red Sea, and so on. David – what was his ability? He didn't have any. What was the small thing? He just had a sling and a pebble. God said, "I'm going to use that to bring Goliath down."

It's just a matter of submitting our resources and joining hands with God. It's not that God needs us to do anything. No, He does not! He can do it. But He would love for us to just submit to Him and say, "This is all I have, and this is where I am. I am incapable. I need You to take this forward." That is more than enough for God. He will take it to wondrous limits that will be miraculous in your eyes. So what did Jesus do when he said, "I've got a lad here with five loaves and two fish?" Jesus said, "That's enough," and He's going to take it. And He took. God will use the resources that you possess and take it to extents that you and I cannot fathom. That's something that we need to etch in our minds, upfront, wherever. He says it's not how big our bank balances are, how capable our position is, what authority we hold. It just doesn't matter. For Him, it's just that we submit.

And what did this boy do? He gave whatever he had. Now think about this boy. I told you they were all thrill seekers. This boy probably went to his mom in the morning and told her that there's a guy in town who's doing wondrous things. Might be a magician. I'd like to go watch him. And mom said: It's going to be a long day, and a long walk. Here, take some bread and fish with you. That's your lunch and dinner. Or mom could have said: You're going out into town to watch this? Bring back some bread and fish. I don't know where he got it from. This was something that was important to him. But when Jesus asked, he gave. There was no struggle, no apprehension. He just gave it. He wanted to see what was going to happen.

And what did Jesus do then? He used all those doubters who said it's not going to happen, the money is not enough, bread is not enough, send them away. He used them. After those five loaves of bread and fish turned into whatever number to feed those 20,000+ people, and the disciples kept going and distributing, coming back, going and distributing again and again, till the people were filled. This was no snack. The multitude were filled, sated. I'm sure the crowd would have been

watching this drama play out between Jesus and the disciples, and they must have been snickering between themselves, laughing at the aspect of just five loaves being taken to feed thousands. Then they would have seen baskets after baskets coming full and going back empty. Then being refilled. There would have been this murmur in the crowd. Suddenly there would have been a hush, a silence. They would be stupefied as to what was happening. They kept eating and were filled. The Bible says so.

Something that we can glean from this is that it's so much easier to fix a problem when you have the solution to the problem standing right in front of you. But we fail because we always look at the problem as the bigger issue. We don't look at God as a problem-solver. We try to solve the problem by our own means.

And after everybody was fed, the Bible says that they were filled, Jesus commanded the disciples to go gather up all the fragments that remain so that nothing is lost. Now, it's not Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. Let's clean up after. It's not that at all. It is not conservation or not wasting resources. That's not the point. John makes a particular point to mention things very specifically. So, while it may have been that God wanted to demonstrate to the disciples the abundance there was, there were a specific number of baskets collected. The Bible says that they gathered and filled up 12 baskets. I was wondering that for a God who is able to pull out unknown numbers of bread and fish, His count could have been exact, to the last mouth, the last morsel that was fed. The good could have stopped. But that didn't happen. It went to the point that there were 12 basketfuls remaining. Why not five? Why not zero? Why not 10? Why 12?

As I was preparing for this, I looked at various interpretations and commentaries and tried to understand. Many of them agreed to the fact that it is a very specific purpose of showing God's abundance and fulfilment. God's grace and His blessing does not come with a specific measure. It goes beyond measure. It overdoes the requirement. That is something that we need to understand. We don't need to ask for specific things. We don't need to ask for just the right amount. God will make the right thing happen at the right time. We have heard a lot of stories about how miraculously God has made provisions. One of them is a famous story that Pastor mentioned a couple of weeks back about the hot water bag for the baby in Africa which had started on its journey a couple of months even before the baby was born. God can be very specific in those answers.

But, at the same time, when God blesses, His abundance of blessing is not limited by a measure. It goes beyond. And obviously there is significance of the #12. There are 12 tribes symbolizing the nations of the world. This is a very apt reasoning that God says to gather up the fragments that remain so that nothing is lost. He came for the entire world. Nobody should be lost. It was His intent that the bread and the water that He feeds would be everlasting. It will be eternal. And because of that, no one would lack and be lost out.

Obviously, there is an interpretation saying that there could be too much of reading into it. but v. 14 says, "Then those men, when they had seen the signs that Jesus did, exclaimed: 'This is truly the prophet who has come into the world.'" If you go back to the definition I said, it's not the sign itself, it's the intent. It's a revelation of something greater happening. And this was God's way of telling the disciples and witnessing to the people that there is something greater going to happen. And it was that His bread and water that He gives would bring the people of the world and the nations back to Him.

Application:

It's not just a story that we look at and we meditate on it and then let it go. But there is an application to this. God's power is manifested in our weakness. The problem is when we don't realize

when we are weak. We stick to trying to find that required solution even in the difficult times, and the lack of resources, or even the availability of minimum resources.

Look at the disciples. They had seen Him do wondrous things. They had seen Him turn water into wine; they had seen Him heal the blind, heal the lame, everything. But when it came to a personal task of a solution that Jesus straightforward asked them: What are we going to do about this situation that we have? they all failed. They all looked at their own capabilities, their own limitations, their own strongholds of trying to find a solution. They failed to see in whose presence they were standing.

And that's the problem with this. Whenever we try to do an interpretation, we ignore God's power. Whenever we try to apply our analysis to it, we belittle God's power. For Jesus, this was a very specific moment of testing His own disciples. John was very clear in writing those things which had very specific teachings, very direct teachings. In fact, the reason John uses certain ways of describing Jesus is because of the distinctive narrative structure and the emphasis or the significance, and finally a unique theological viewpoint.

The unique theological viewpoint of John was always to point to the person of Jesus – His identity as the Son of God and His divinity. And this was a moment that they could have actually done that. They could have very well just submitted to Him saying: We don't have the resources; we don't have the capability. You tell us what we need to do and we're going to do it. We know that You can solve the situation. But they tried to bring out the solution for themselves. And the problem with them was they had not yet experienced it for themselves. That's something very real for us. We can't live on borrowed faith. We have to experience God's power personally.

When we look at the application from this chapter, it is very clear that each of us has somehow responded in moments of our troubled situations, trying to put ourselves in control. But here, Jesus takes all those doubts and throws them around and He says, "I want to show you who's in control. All you need to do is submit and give it all, and I will make it happen.

Amen.
