

John 6:1–14

Cradle To The Grave: Facing the Overwhelming - When God Multiplies What We Offer

This morning we look at the feeding of the five thousand, recorded in John 6:1–14. All four Gospels include this miracle, which tells us how important it was to the early church. But what John emphasizes is not just the miracle itself, but the people involved in it—and how they each responded to an overwhelming situation.

Before we examine the miracle, imagine the story through the eyes of the little boy in the crowd.

Let's call him Nathanael.

Early that morning Nathanael's mother called from the doorway of their small home. "Nathanael! Wake up!"

His feet hit the floor immediately. He did not need to be dragged out of bed that morning. Everyone in town had been talking about Jesus. They said He healed sick people. They said He gave blind people their sight. Just days earlier someone had told the story of a man who had been crippled for thirty-eight years—and Jesus made him walk.

Some people were even whispering that this man might be the Son of God.

Nathanael hurried into the kitchen. The smell of freshly baked barley bread filled the room. His mother stood near the fire wrapping a lunch in cloth.

"I can still go see Him, right Mom?"

"Yes," she said, smiling. "But take this with you."

She placed five small barley loaves in the cloth and added two small fish. It was not a large meal. Barley bread was the bread of poor families. But it was enough for a boy spending the day outside.

“Make sure you keep hold of it,” she said.

“Don’t worry, Mom,” Nathanael laughed. “Nobody cooks like you.”

Then he ran down the dusty road toward the hills outside town.

As he ran, he saw people everywhere—families walking together, men helping elderly relatives, even a group carrying someone on a mat who hoped Jesus might heal him.

By the time Nathanael reached the hillside, thousands of people had gathered. He pushed through the crowd until he could see Jesus and the twelve disciples nearby.

The boy had no idea that before the day was over, his small lunch would become part of one of the greatest miracles Jesus ever performed, and he would be part of the solution to an overwhelming problem.

Have you ever faced a situation that was overwhelming? Or a problem so difficult or complex that resolving it seemed impossible?

Most of us have.

And it doesn’t matter how old or young we are – we all face overwhelming and stressful situations.

It could be the first day of school

or Monday morning's algebra class

Or it might be the stack of bills that grow and grow,

or waiting to hear from the doctor's office to learn about the test results,

or the frustration about the job -- or the fear that the job will be lost,

Our lives are full of experiences that seem overwhelming and beyond our capacity to handle.

In our New Testament lesson, we have an extreme example of such an experience.

Jesus and his disciples have tried to escape from the crowds. They do that from time to time so that Jesus can both rest and give special training to his 12 special disciples.

But the plan doesn't work.

The crowds follow.

Five thousand people come and invade the solitude of Christ and his apostles. Immediately Jesus begins to think in very practical terms about feeding the crowd.

Talk about overwhelming situations – how do you feed 5,000 people?

The way Jesus handled it was to perform a miracle.

You may remember that I have pointed out John's Gospel depicts 7 signs, or miracles that Jesus performs in this Gospel.

Other Gospels mention quite a few miracles, but John mentions only 7.

The first was turning the water into wine at a wedding feast.

Then in chapter 4 there was the healing of a nobleman's son.

In chapter 5 there was the healing of a paralytic.

Now in chapter 6, there is this, the fourth of seven signs – the feeding of the multitude.

This was not the first time such a miracle had been performed. Our Old Testament lesson tells us that this is what Elisha did with 100 people.

Nor was this the last time this kind of miracle took place.

Later on in his ministry, Jesus fed another multitude with a small amount of food – that time feeding a mere 4,000 people. (**Matthew 14** tells of the feeding of the 5,000, followed by **Matthew 15** and the feeding of the 4,000. **Matthew 16:9** and 10 mentions the feeding of both groups).

As John tells about this particular miracle, he seems to be more interested in how different people became involved in the miracle than in the miracle itself.

John tells us that Jesus looked up and saw the massive crowd approaching. Turning to Philip, He asked a practical question:

“Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” (John 6:5)

John immediately tells us something important: *Jesus asked this only to test him, for He already had in mind what He was going to do* (John 6:6).

The test was not about Jesus' power.

It was about how Philip would respond to an overwhelming problem.

Philip represents the first approach many people take when life becomes overwhelming.

Philip looks at the crowd and begins calculating.

Eight months' wages, he says, would not buy enough bread for each person even to have a small bite (John 6:7).

Philip is not wrong. His math is correct. Feeding thousands of people would require enormous resources.

Philip represents realism.

When we face overwhelming situations—financial pressure, medical diagnoses, family struggles—we often respond like Philip. We analyze the numbers. We calculate the odds. We measure the resources.

And sometimes the numbers simply do not work.

Philip's problem is not that he is realistic. The problem is that he stops there.

Philip is right – this is a hopeless situation.

But while it is good to be realistic about any situation, Philip's approach is not a very good one, because nothing happens positively to change the situation.

In his mind...Situation is hopeless....Nothing can be done.

The problem with that attitude is that it becomes self-fulfilling.

When we BELIEVE that nothing can be done, then the situation does indeed become hopeless.

As we face our problems at work, or with our families, or in our church or society, the best way to ensure that there will be NO improvements, no resolutions to our problems, is for us to sit back with Philip and to complain that it's hopeless, that nothing can be done.

That algebra test is coming on Monday – but nothing can be done, so why study?

That stack of bills keeps growing, it can't get any better, so why not just keep running up the credit card charges?

Work will never get better – so why try?

The marriage is over.

That teenager is hopeless.

The power of negative thinking is real and destructive.

Situation is hopeless. Nothing can be done...

Well, that's one approach, but it's not a very complete approach to dealing with the overwhelming.

If the situation depends only on human resources, then yes—it is impossible

Then John introduces Andrew.

Andrew takes a different approach. While Philip is calculating the impossibility of the situation, Andrew, a fisherman who is use to working on a team, begins looking around.

He searches the crowd to see if there might be any resources at all. Anyone who can help.

Eventually he finds the boy with the lunch.

Andrew brings him to Jesus and says, “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?” (John 6:9)

Instead of saying, “The situation is hopeless, there is nothing I can do,” Andrew seems to be saying, “I’ll see if there is anyone who can help me.”

There is a big difference in the two approaches to this problem.

Andrew is not naïve.

Like Philip, he takes a realistic approach.

Like Philip, he knows that he is facing a difficult situation.

But unlike Philip, he does not despair.

He does not sit back and do nothing.

He takes the time to call out for help. And he finds a boy with some food.

So often, we are overwhelmed by our job, our family, our finances -- whatever. And there are others in our midst who can help us, but we don’t call out for help.

Sometimes when life overwhelms us, the first step toward change is simply asking for help.

God often works through other people—friends, family, pastors, counselors, doctors, and believers who walk alongside us.

Andrew teaches us that overwhelming situations should not isolate us—they should move us toward community.

Then there is the boy...the one we started our message off with.

He represents a third response to overwhelming circumstances.

The boy does not have much. Five barley loaves. Two fish.

But he offers what he has.

He could have kept the lunch for himself. After all, five thousand hungry people surrounded him. Giving away his food might mean he would go hungry.

Yet he places everything he has into Jesus' hands.

And that is where miracles begin.

God rarely asks us to start with abundance. He simply asks us to start with willingness.

What little we have—a few abilities, a few resources, a few hours of time—can become something far greater when surrendered to Christ.

Finally, there is Jesus.

Jesus represents the response we most need when circumstances overwhelm us.

Jesus takes what is offered.

He gives thanks.

And He distributes it.

What begins as a small lunch becomes a feast for thousands.

John tells us everyone ate as much as they wanted (John 6:11).

And when the meal was finished, the disciples gathered twelve baskets of leftovers. (12 represents authority/governance-12tribes, completeness and perfect plan – 12 apostles, prophetic vision – 12 gates of new Jerusalem)

More food remained after the miracle than before it began.

This miracle reminds us of a profound truth: what we place in Christ's hands never becomes less—it becomes more.

This does not mean monetarily necessarily, but that God will multiply and bless.

Later in the chapter Jesus explains the deeper meaning behind the miracle.

If you move beyond our scripture, you find that the people continue to follow Jesus, and Jesus says, *“You are just following me because you ate the bread and are satisfied.” (John 6:26)*

And Jesus goes onto say that earthly bread spoils and molds, you eat then you get hungry again. He has come to offer himself – which calls the “bread of life.” **(John 6:35)**

“I am the bread of life,” He says. “Whoever comes to me will never go hungry.” (John 6:35)

The miracle of bread was pointing to something greater.

Just as Jesus satisfied physical hunger on the hillside, He alone satisfies the deeper hunger of the human heart.

That's what you need in order to deal with life.

That's what you need in order to face your struggles.

You need Jesus in your life.

Reality is, when we face overwhelming circumstances, we need something from each person in this story.

We need Philip's honesty—to face problems realistically.

We need Andrew's awareness—to seek help from others.

We need the boy's willingness—to offer what we have.

But above all, we need Jesus—the Bread of Life.

You're dealing with cancer? You need a little of Philip – you have to face up to the seriousness of this illness.

But you need a little of Andrew to seek out the help and the support of others.

And you need a little of that boy, to see what resources you already have to give toward handling this cancer. But you also need the Bread of Life – Jesus. Everything else will leave you still hungry for more. Only Jesus satisfies completely.

The cancer will still be there – but the power to accept and handle this will be there as well.

The wife leave you?

Your child taking drugs?

That job still frustrating?

Credit card bills out of control?

Algebra test waiting to greet you on Monday morning?

You've got to face these problems.

You've got to look to others for help.

You've got to see what you can give to the situation.

But more than anything else – you've got to have Jesus.

If you don't have the Bread of Life – whatever else you do just won't be enough.

Because when what we have is placed in His hands, He multiplies it in ways we never imagined.

And that is how miracles begin—even today.

You know, the great cosmic tragedy is that not everyone will accept this.

Not everyone will accept Christ.

In John's Gospel, chapter six, after Jesus feeds the multitude, the people ask for a sign.

In verse 30, the people ask, *“What miracle will you do? If we can see a miracle, then we will believe you. Our fathers ate manna in the desert... what will you do for us?”*

Isn't that strange?

I think if I had been among the 5,000 and been fed by the bread Jesus gave, multiplying a few loaves into enough for everyone to eat – that would have impressed me.

Jesus has already performed several signs.

He's turned water into wine.

He's healed a nobleman's son.

He's healed a paralyzed man.

He's fed a multitude.

He's even walked on water.

But it isn't enough – people keep demanding another sign. And without being satisfied with the miracles he has already performed – they leave.

Imagine – being the pastor of a 5,000 member congregation, and then having everyone leave except a dozen folks.

At the end of chapter 6, Jesus turns to his few remaining followers and asks, “*Do you want to leave also?*” (6:67)

And Peter speaks up and says, “Lord, where would we go? Only you have the words that give eternal life.” (6:68)

If you want to deal with life and all of its overwhelming stresses – you need a little of Philip, a little of Andrew, a little of that boy – but you need all of Jesus!