



## Feeding the Multitudes – A Young Boy’s Gift Enables A Miracle John 6:1-13

### Planting

#### Background:

While the scripture reference for this study is from the Gospel of John, it is interesting to note that the *Feeding of the Multitudes* is the only one of Christ’s miracles that is recorded in all four of the Gospels. Perhaps that is a sign of the significance of this event in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Throughout the Book of John you’ll find many accounts of the miraculous signs and wonders of Jesus told as evidence to convince people who the writer believed Jesus was. Many scholars and commentary writers believe that the writer’s accounts of the spectacular miracles of Christ are shared in this book so that people might “see and believe” in the majesty of Jesus. The miracles recorded in John’s gospel are portrayed as deeds of power and majesty, demonstrating that Jesus is a man sent from heaven by God.

In the Gospel of John, as in Mark’s gospel, Jesus is first introduced to us as an adult. Probably written

10-15 years after the other gospels, John’s account of Jesus’ life does not include:

- The virgin birth of Jesus
- Jesus’ baptism by John
- Jesus’ time in the wilderness
- The sharing of parables
- The Last Supper
- The trial before the Sanhedrin

In the sixth chapter of John, before the gathering of the 5,000, the writer tells us that the large crowds of people were following Jesus because “*they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick.*” (NRSV) Then the writer describes the miracle of 5,000 hungry people being fed as a result of Jesus’ ability to multiply a meager gift from a generous child. The writer emphasizes the fact that a young boy provides the meager resources and that Christ multiplies the offering into a filling meal with an abundance of leftovers.

Following the feeding of the crowd Jesus instructs the disciples to “*gather up the fragments leftover, that nothing may be lost.*” The gospel writer continues, “*So they gathered them up and filled 12 baskets with fragments...left by those who had eaten. When the people saw the sign, which he had done, they said, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!”*” (Revised Standard)

It’s the leftovers in this story that appear to really make the difference in convincing the crowd that Jesus is the prophet from God. Not until after gathering up 12 baskets of leftovers do the people in the crowd recognize the abundant compassion and power of Jesus; but once Jesus’ power and compassion are revealed to them, the people are convinced that Jesus is the one they’ve been expecting.

### **Tending:**

The story of the feeding of the 5,000 turns several worldly images upside-down. First of all, the seemingly meager resources of five loaves and two fish become an overly abundant meal for thousands of people as a result of Christ's blessing; secondly, a young, humble, unimportant child, provides the gift that is multiplied to feed the crowd; and lastly, the leftovers –*the scraps, waste, odds and ends*- are the elements of the meal that impress the people into believing in the majesty of Christ. In summary, just as Jesus' compassion and power extended over and above anyone's expectation, the smallest gifts and remnants, blessed by God, make all the difference in these peoples' lives.

I've been told that we can estimate the boy's bread and fish to be equivalent to two small canned sardines and five small dinner rolls; but it hardly matters how large or small the actual gift. Even if the boy's lunch had been a hearty, full-sized dinner, it still could not have measured up to the need Jesus and the disciples were facing. But Jesus wasn't really expecting Philip to have enough money to feed the crowd in this story either, when he asked him "*How are we to buy bread so that these people might eat?*" (Revised Standard) No, there was no way, other than a miracle, that the crowd would be satisfied on that day during the celebration of Passover.

It's significant that the gifts of a small boy- willing to share all that he had - enabled thousands of people to experience the miracle of Christ's blessing. The person who provided the elements that made the miracle possible was not a person of great value in the society of the day-not rich or powerful. And even though it was incomprehensible for anyone to think that a child's humble offering of bread and fish could make a difference with all those people needing to be fed, the offering makes all the difference in making the miracle possible.

The disciples witness Jesus' providing for everyone, but when the people in the crowd see the leftovers (enough to fill 12 baskets) they begin to recognize Christ's abundant compassion and power expressed in the miracle. In seeing, and taking part in, the miracle the people declare and affirm Christ as the one for whom they have been hoping.

### **ACTIVITY/CONVERSATION:**

Once the offering in the story is surrendered into Jesus' hands and it is blessed- the gift becomes "way more" than enough. There is enough to satisfy the hunger of all the people; with enough leftovers to calm the fears of the uncertain yet hopeful disciples; and enough revelation to cause the people to recognize the miracle of Jesus and to get in line to follow him.

**In a large group** (if you have 10 people or less), **in pairs, or in small groups take a few minutes to:**

1) *Imagine the young boy's situation in this story, with all those people looking to be satisfied and the disciples wandering through the crowd trying to get people to sit down without a clue as to how Jesus could possibly "feed so many the people".* Talk about how the boy might have felt about the disciples recognizing his gift, the boy's offering the gift to the disciples (and ultimately to Jesus), and what the boy might have thought when he saw his gift multiplied to satisfy so many people.

2) Talk about the times have you shared your gifts and talents – even though they seemed meager or small - and realized that God blessed those gifts for the benefit of others. (How about

teaching Sunday school, serving a meal, reading to a child, visiting a homebound person, coordinating Vacation Bible School, etc.)

3) Talk about the times you have, or someone you know has, chosen not to contribute their talents or gifts because they thought they just weren't good enough or big enough to make a difference. How did it feel not to participate in contributing those God given gifts?

4) Consider whether or not there are people in your churches, families, or communities who don't participate in ministry because they feel that that what they have to offer is too small and insignificant? Do you know people who possess the gift of hospitality, or teaching, or music, or compassion, but chose not to offer their gifts because they are afraid, embarrassed, or unsure of themselves? Talk about how their gifts could impact the kingdom of God.

5) Talk about ways the church can better equip all people to exercise their gifts and talents in ministry. How is everyone valued and invited to be part of the ministry of the church? Identify a few ways to make sure that even what might be considered the "remnants or leftovers" are not lost in the work of the church?

## **Harvesting**

### **What difference does this text make in our lives today?**

In this miracle Jesus creates something miraculous out of something small. It's amazing that the same God who blessed the gift, which enabled the multitudes to be "satisfied", also offers us the opportunity to come to know Christ and to share our God-given gifts to be a blessing, as well. Just as Christ was revealed to the multitudes in this story as *the Bread of Life*, we too, come to know Jesus when we recognize his abundant compassion and respond out of that compassion to meet the needs around us.

How do you, your family members, congregation, and community follow the examples presented to us in this story of the compassionate Christ, a generous boy, the faithful yet uncertain servant/disciples, and more that 5,000 obedient followers?

**Take a few minutes to talk about the ways you, your church, and the community are meeting the needs of the people in your community. Celebrate the many ways your church is recognizing and affirming the gifts and talents of people through reaching out to the multitudes!**

### **A Second Harvest!**

*If you are looking for other concrete ways to reach-out in your community consider these ideas:*

- Start a food pantry in your congregation. Visit the [feedingthemultitudes.com](http://feedingthemultitudes.com) resource web page for a manual on how to start a food pantry in your community.

- Host a dinner one night a week/or per month for people in your neighborhood (*not just for the members of your congregation*) that could use a meal and fellowship. Invite people to the meal without any conditions to pay for the meal, to join the church, or to be "beholding" to the church in any way.

- Explore the *Bread for the World* web site for information/activities and share them in your congregation, family, and community. (Ex: *More than 850 million people in the world go*

*hungry every day. In the United States, 11.7 million children live in households where people have to skip meals in order to make ends meet. One in 10 households in the United States are living with hunger or at risk of hunger.)* Perhaps just becoming aware of the needs that exist will inspire other outreach ministries.

### **Celebrating the Bounty**

Make a commitment/covenant to act on what you've discovered through this lesson. If you believe there are people in your family, your church, and your work place that have gifts to share, find ways to invite them to participate more fully. If there are hunger needs (or other needs) in your community think of ways to make a difference with your gifts.

### **Closing Unison Prayer:**

*Sometimes it is through the large miraculous happenings of life that we come to know you more fully God; but other times it is through the small things of life- the seemingly unimportant talent or gift -that you reveal yourself to us. Remind us of your compassion for the whole world and of our ability to make a difference in the world on your behalf. Give us courage to use the gifts you have entrusted to us even when they seem insignificant, and remind us of your desire for no one to be lost, and no gift wasted, but for everyone to come to know of your love and compassion for the whole world. AMEN*

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