

INTRODUCTION

How big is a crowd? “*Two’s company, three’s a crowd.*” I remember that truth from yesteryear when my girls were much younger and they would have friends over to play. Two usually could play well together yet a third often changed the dynamics. But a real crowd is bigger than three. I think of a crowd as all the people at a football game or at a concert or the people lining the streets to watch a parade. So how many really makes up a crowd? 100, 500, or 5000?

The crowd in John 6 numbers 5000. But that really means the crowd numbered 5000 men—you know “*heads of household.*” Add the women and children and the total goes up—perhaps we are talking about 10,000 or more people. That’s the number of people that would fill the Richmond Coliseum.

By the way, all four gospels record the feeding of the 5000 story. It is the only public miracle described in all four gospels. The details, of course, vary from one gospel writer to another. Matthew is the one who tells us that besides 5000 men there were women and children present too. Luke tells us that the crowd was instructed to sit down in groups of 50. Mark says that the fish leftovers were gathered as well as the leftover bread. All the gospels except John say that the disciples urged Jesus to send the crowd home.

John tells us that it was the season of Passover. This is the second Passover mentioned in John (see 2:13). By the way, this section of John emphasizes the Jewish festivals. Perhaps the crowd is bigger because of Passover pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem. The main reason for the crowd is that Jesus has been doing miracles. People are following him seeking his help and wanting to see what he would do next. A crowd includes all types, doesn’t it? *Curious ones, casual ones, the callous as well as the committed.*

Picture this setting in concentric circles. Jesus stands at the *center*. Around him are his 12 disciples—his *core* of committed followers. In the larger circle is the *crowd* with all *types* of people. In the other gospels Jesus is teaching and as the day wears on, the people naturally grow tired and hungry... Jesus, aware of this, turns to one disciple in particular and asks him about obtaining bread. He asks Philip because Philip is from *Bethesda*—he is a native of the area. If anyone knows where to buy bread it should be Philip.

Philip does not answer directly. He does not say, “*Well, the closest bakery is at Tiberias and the next closest at Bethesda.*” He answers on the basis of a financial calculation. *Even if we knew where to find bread, how could we ever pay for it?*

200 *denarii* would buy everybody one bite. And a *denarius*, of course, was a day’s wage. What he really seems to be saying is, “*Come on Jesus, you know we do not have enough money to buy bread for this big crowd! Really!*”

Do you ever do problem-solving **this** way—with a calculator? It would take *x* number of dollars and *y* number of days to do this or that. It is a time-honored way of problem solving and one that we in the modern world are accustomed to using—one appreciates Philip’s candor and pragmatism. However, sometimes problems and obstacles leap out at us—they overwhelm us so we cannot calculate. Think of Japan in the aftermath of a historic earthquake & tsunami.

Then **Andrew** spoke up. He had been scouting in the crowd and had found a boy who had packed his lunch. This is a different approach, yes? See what kind of resources you do have. Five small barley loaves and two small fish. A better bread was *wheat*. *Barley* was a poor man's bread. And three loaves were considered enough for one person's lunch. The small fish were likely pickled or salted sardines. Not much, but something.

Illustration: the fish from **Lake Tanganyika** drying in the market

Andrew begins positively by bringing forward the lad who is willing to share, but in the same breath he wonders how far this meager offering will go to feed such a large crowd... And remember, in the other gospel accounts the disciples' solution is to send everyone home. "*Let's send them home!*"

Do we ever do problem solving **that** way? Sweep it aside. Send the problems away. Let someone else deal with it. The disciples had surveyed the scene and they had calculated the challenge. Too many people and too little food and not enough money. Therefore, the only solution was to break up the crowd. Send them away. It was time for *YoYo's*. Do you know *YoYo 's?* You're On Your Own (Y-O-Y-O) for dinner! Actually some scholars think this is what happened...

But Jesus has another way of problem-solving. In fact, John tells us that Jesus asked Philip in order to test him because he already knew what he would do. Jesus has the disciples tell everyone to be seated on the grassy hillside. And then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks and distributed the bread. Then he did the same with the fish. He offered to all as much as they wanted.

What does this picture of Jesus suggest? Does it remind you of the Last Supper? Does it call to mind Jesus who took bread and said, "*This is my body broken for you*"? John says Jesus gave thanks before distributing the food (*eucharist*).

So how does the story end? There was food enough for everybody and food left over — 12 baskets filled with leftovers. One for each disciple! Then the crowd was stirred and said he must be the *Prophet* who is to come.

And Jesus, knowing they meant to force him to be their *king*, withdrew to the mountain to pray. The reference to "prophet" recalls what? **Moses** and the manna story.

The crowd is attracted to the notion that Jesus will serve them as a mighty prophet or king. But their response is not yet one of faith. Their understanding of Jesus as prophet and king is *shortsighted*. They are attracted to the miracle and to the miraculous work but not to the Master.

Now—look at the next passage. This also is a familiar story--*Jesus walks on water*. But now there is no crowd—only the disciples. READ STORY.

16When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, 17where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them. 18A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough. 19When they had rowed three or three and a half miles, ^[a] they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were terrified. 20But he

said to them, "***It is I; don't be afraid.***" 21 Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.

A windstorm blows up while they are in the boat and on the lake. And Jesus appears—walking on the water and calming the _____ calming the what? Not so much the sea as the disciples. He appears, gets into the boat and immediately the boat arrives at shore. Because this is the next sign and because John pairs these two signs together we will consider the stories together. I want you to notice two things in particular. First, what terrified the disciples? That's right; it's not the storm but Jesus walking on the water. Secondly, notice at the end of the storm that Jesus says some reassuring words.

Listen to what Jesus says to them. "*It is I; don't be afraid.*" This simple statement is the **key** to understanding the whole incident and the feeding miracle as well. Jesus is not simply identifying himself. He is saying, "*Don't be afraid; it is I AM.*" What he says is almost a pun. "*Hey, it is I.*" And "*hey, It is I AM.*"

It is *Jesus*, the Rabbi and Master---the carpenter's son.

And it is Jesus who turned water into wine.

And it is Jesus who healed the official's son and healed the paralytic.

And it is Jesus who fed the 5000.

And it is *Jesus*, the Christ---the Son of the living God.

I and the Father are One, says Jesus. In the Fourth Gospel Jesus is identified by a series of *I Am* sayings.

-I am the *Bread of Life*

-I am the *light of the world*

-I am *the gate*

-I am the *good shepherd*

-I am *the vine*

-I am the *resurrection and the life*

-I am the *way, the truth and the life*

In the OT God is identified as I AM. When God spoke to Moses in the burning bush and told him to go to Pharaoh on behalf of the Israelites, Moses asked God a question. He asked, "*What will I say to the people when they ask me your name?*" And God said, "*I AM WHO I AM.*" Tell them, "*I AM has sent me to you.*"

Jesus shares the divine name (it is a version of the verb **TO BE**) with His Father. Remember how that got him in trouble with the Jewish leaders? He calls God *his* father. How can He do that?

The feeding miracle does call to mind Moses and the first Passover. But Jesus is more than a prophet and more than a carpenter. He is the Passover Bread of Life and He is the Passover Lamb. Through the course of the gospel story the 12 disciples learn more and more about their Master.

With each parable and each miraculous sign they glimpse more of who Jesus really is.

And every lesson offered to them is also one for you and me. They saw Jesus change water into wine. But when a large crowd becomes hungry they cannot envision a Jesus solution. And when the winds blew and the waves rose they needed another kind of deliverance. But the solution was scarier than the storm. *"Did you see that? Did you see Jesus walk on water?"*

The disciples do not yet have enough faith to think big. But they are learning.

The solutions were occasions for miraculous power. Such displays are offered to help us live and to help us believe.

But why did Jesus use the little boy's lunch. He did not need it. Perhaps he wanted his disciples to see that no matter what they had---even the tiniest little thing---if they really gave it to him, he could use it. **Little is much when God is in it.**

What does this mean for us? Sometimes we might feel like saying, *"Lord, you do not understand my problem... If you only knew how I feel... and what I face..."*

I have calculated it all out and I have consulted the experts.

It is too big a problem and there is nothing I can do. "

Story: Dorothy and Emily's hearing (five loaves and two fish)

It is harder to give God our weaknesses than our strengths.

But the Lord says, *"Give me whatever you have, including your weaknesses."* Perhaps you and I have missed opportunities and even miracles because we were unwilling to give God both our difficulty and our inability--our trouble and our weakness.

Know that God wants to help you. He longs to deliver his people from afflictions. He wants to pour out his grace upon you. *"Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!" (Isaiah 30:18)*

Do you believe God is **big** enough for *your* problem, for *your* situation? Nothing much can happen **until** you see Him for who He is. This is why John's gospel again and again **shows** us **who** he is. John is painting a portrait of Jesus with signs and stories to enlarge our understanding of the *word become flesh*.

(Elizabeth Elliott—worked among *Auca Indians* in Ecuador from 1955--1963):

I am learning that nothing I have, nothing I am, will be refused on the part of Christ; I simply give it to him as the little boy gave Jesus his five loaves and two fishes--even with the same feeling of the disciples when they said; "What is the good of that for such a crowd?" Naturally, in almost anything I offer to Christ, my reaction would be, "What is the good of that?" The point is, the use he makes of it is none of my business; it is his blessing. So this grief, this trouble, this suffering, this challenge-- whatever it is, which at the moment is God's means of testing my faith and bringing me to the recognition of who he is--that is the thing I can offer.

Do you have nothing to give? Then give that. Turn your head and your heart to the Lord. Your

nothing plus God is **everything**.

LET US PRAY.