

### **The Purposes of Jesus #3: That All Shall Be Fed**

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John 6:1-21

A story was told of a priest in a small rural church. He was restarting the local Sunday school. He recruited the new Sunday School teachers, got the curriculum, announced in worship that Sunday School was commencing. It was in the Social Hall of the small church. There was only the sanctuary and the social hall, so Sunday School was in the social hall. One Sunday, a church stalwart came into the social hall early to get the coffee made. He saw the one teacher and 2 students sitting at a table in the corner of the room, learning about Jesus. The priest was passing through on the way to the sanctuary to get ready for morning worship. The church officer said to the priest, "Gee, it's too bad, only 2 kids. Looks like Sunday School is a failure." The Priest, preferring to see the work of God in the room, said, "Well, tell me how many children did we have in Sunday School last month?" "None," said the stalwart. "Well then," replied the priest, "Look at it this way, you've witnessed 200% growth in your Sunday School in just one month!" Which started to look more like a miracle than a failure and that church officer became the biggest champion of the newly re-launched Sunday School. Asked to feed the children, that priest said, "Here are 2 you may feed." The church said, "Only two?" Just as the disciples said, "Only a few loaves and a couple fish?" And look what happened. So today I want to speak with you about the very real need and the very real possibility that ALL SHALL BE FED. And more so, why that will require a different look at the whole idea we have of being fed.

Even as I see this as a purpose of Jesus, I wrestle with the mixed message Jesus sent us about the matter. The Jesus who said : Feed 'em. All of 'em (John 20 eg) that Jesus also says "The poor you will always have with you." Matthew 26:11...not an innovation by the way...Jesus is reminding everyone of us what the tradition had held since Deuteronomy 15:11 "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I [Moses] therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."

Well there can be no doubt, the people who populate the Jesus

story are often these, the poor and the needy. They followed Jesus around the countryside because they needed him to survive, to live, to receive wisdom, to be healed in an oppressive time, to receive the bread of life in a season of dry spirits and desperation. We have an instant recognition of the powerful images of spiritual and physical hunger. The human want of the soul can be seen from quite a ways off. If you've watched any of the Holy Blockbusters by Cecille B. Demille or the more recent Jesus movies, one thing is common to all. The anguish and dire need of those who clung to Jesus' every word and every step. They came to Jesus to be fed.

In this case, in the reading from John, what they may have noticed most is that he makes them to lie down in green pastures and feeds all to restore their souls. <sup>1</sup> There is also plenty left over for the next time. If five loaves and two fish were enough for the over 5,000, then 12 baskets would make a good starter batch for the next congregation.

Let me be clear about what this is. I approach this as a miracle story, a wonder-working story. If we apologize for it and dismiss it, we throw out the power of this story to startle and save. The central image is that All Needed to Be Fed and All WERE Fed. AND, and, that proceeding from that day it was apparent that this was a repeatable event. They had the props, 12 baskets of provisions for the next time of need.

The dilemma for us and for the church is that the One who says feed them all, also says, the need will never go away, those 12 baskets are going to come in handy. The miracle of human kindness worked out on that hillside, will not alone accomplish the deed. Hunger will not cease, the miracle will need to occur again and again and again. The greater dilemma is for us to see ourselves as among the hungry AND among those who share bread with others.

Boy does this drive us us crazy. One kind of Faith says God could do it. God could replicate that event, could eradicate hunger. Why doesn't God just do it? Probably missing the point with that question, eh? Doubt responds (also, missing the point I believe) that, Well the

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<sup>1</sup> Green, Joel B. & Willimon, William H., General Editors, Wesley Study Bible, commentary notes at John 6:10, Abingdon, 2009

answer is plain enough, it never happened and therefore could never happen again, let alone on a global scale. And we are left in the middle of what is not a philosophical or even a logistical problem, but rather a spiritual catastrophe. Dire need and no workable way to apply our faith and hope and love.

The Good News today is that we will always be called to lean on the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 because there will always be the un-miraculous reality of hunger and strife. And we profess that God in Jesus Christ is our way out of that seemingly un-winnable end-game.

What's here for us in this story is an outline of our faith declaration wrapped around a purpose of Jesus. That ALL need sustenance, that Jesus stands by ready to sustain us, and this keeps us alive and kicking for a purpose: that we might carry those 12 baskets on to the next hunger event we encounter. I tell you that I believe that the redemption of the the world is tied critically to these steps. The improvement of your personal life, your family, your community and the world, is wrapped in this.

And so here now we are finally ready to say something about hunger, being fed and the other thing...the unspoken thing. The matter of growth. We say we come to God because we are hungry and need to be fed. Most often I hear it in relation to Worship Experiences. I hear it all the time. I say it myself. "I go to church to be fed." I'm pretty sure you've heard it, too. I believe this is coded language, a short-cut way of saying something more.

We all use short-cut language. If you text-message, you use REALLY short-cut language. If you've ever text-messaged anyone, you know what LOL means. (laugh out loud) And you know that IMHO means \_\_\_\_\_ (in my humble opinion). And that BTW means \_\_\_\_\_ (by the way.) These are all ways of saying something in a compact space. I believe that saying "I Go To Church To Be Fed," is also such a phrase. What would that be?... IGTCTBF.

I think we are pointing to a more complex need when we say that. I know a pastor who can really incite angry conversation when he says, "Those who come to worship to be fed, leave hungry."<sup>1</sup> My expanded version of that thought, is that I believe we come to worship because

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Tenney-Brittain

we are hungry and we need to Grow. Being Fed is a step, a middle moment. It is the instrument of growth, not the destination.

This requires an acknowledgement that is counter-intuitive. Eagerness and mild, not chronic, mild anxiety goads us to growth. We are in the self-esteem era and mistake good feelings about self as the end goal. It has been known for awhile that it is not satisfaction with the present state of affairs that moves anyone or anything forward. It is hunger, a mild form of pain, to be frank, that pushes us on. A hunger for knowledge drives our kids through school. A hunger for wisdom takes that knowledge and applies it to the human condition. A hunger for justice puts people in the mission field and out in public service. A hunger for God urges each of us to be here and in many houses of worship across the world. Growth and strength come from a mild discomfort with what is and a yearning for what can be. The mild discomfort is a signal of need.

We hunger as a triggering mechanism that alerts us to a need for food so that we can grow. Spiritually, we hunger and that driving force gets us in the neighborhood of God so that we can grow and be fit for a life of servant ministry. Now that may seem like a trivial difference, but I am convinced that it is a world of difference. All are fed, not to be satisfied, not to be pacified, but to be energized, and made eager and ready to grow. We are fed by God in Jesus Christ, so that we will grow.

The story in John had that implicit "Go and Do Likewise" Clause, that we find in all the Jesus stories. Here, Jesus would be saying, take these 12 baskets and go find others who need healing, teaching, justice, reconciliation, and salvation. The push to FEED ALL, is once again *our* calling. And it is a call to mobilize for transformation and improvement. That All Shall Be Fed says to me that All Shall be made ready to run the race, not to sit around and be satisfied too long after the banquet has ended.

This 3<sup>rd</sup> purpose of Jesus is aimed at each of us in differing ways. But each of us is called to be fed and then take up the basket of resource that is produced from that encounter. And to move out into the world, because the resource you carry is also a miracle that will multiply as you share it.

Next week I will be in Chicago at our national School of

Congregational Development event, and Rev. Laurie McHugh will journey with you through the 4<sup>th</sup> Purpose of Jesus : That All Shall Tend Gardens.