

“More Than We Can Handle”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 6.1-15

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Some among us are big-picture folks. “What are we going to accomplish?” they ask. “What are our long-term goals? What are we all about?” We need people like that. Otherwise, we just stumble around in all directions and none.

Some are get-it-done folks. “How are we going to get there? What works best to get us to our goal?” We need people like that. Otherwise, we never get moving.

But, even when we know where we are going (that’s called “strategy”), and even when we know how we’re getting there (that’s called “tactics”), we’ll be in a mess without “logistics” people.

Someone has to bring dinner.¹

II

The crowd is scampering after Jesus. Five thousand people! They’ve been hearing and seeing what Jesus’ has been doing, “signs” like healing the sick and restoring the broken. If you are sick or broken, or if someone you love is sick or broken, you’re going to take notice. You’re going to pay attention. You’re going to go along — to the ends of the earth, maybe — hoping this Jesus might have something for you.

If you are one of those big-picture people, you might also be wondering if there is even more going on than a mending here, a touch-up there. You might be wondering if all this is a prelude to something even bigger, a complete renovation of everything. That’s what we’ve been waiting for. How long, O Lord?² This is the cry of slaves in sweatshops, of civilians under siege, of fathers holding misshapen newborns, and mothers wondering which bills not to pay this month. How long, O Lord? All of our “How Longs?” together form an agonizing mess of everything that is not right. These signs Jesus is doing get us wondering if he has something for everything. . . .

Then, we realize we forgot supper.

¹ For a good description of strategy, tactics and logistics, see http://www.civfanatics.com/civ4/strategy/strat_tactics_logistics.php

² “How long?” is a recurring cry in the Psalms.

III

No one else remembered either. No one in this crowd. None of Jesus' team. Just one child.

"Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" That was Jesus' question that day. What might his question be today, as he stands beside us, and we look with him at what's coming our way.

For instance, these days I'm thinking, *Where are we going to get what we need to help, not all the 20 million refugees in this world, but just the one family we'll be sponsoring? The money? A home for them? Enough volunteers? Honestly, we do not know what we are doing!*

It gets more personal. *Where am I going to get what I need to get through what I'm going through? Where am I going to get what I need to help my friend? Where am I going to get what I need to figure things out?*

Where are we going to get what we need, to keep who we are as Bethany/Elora United Church going? We're doing okay. Still, there are these crowds. I'm talking about our neighbours, those close by and further away. God is calling us to serve and bless them. God keeps putting their needs in front of us. If we're paying attention to God, we'll notice. Where are we going to get enough to do what we need to do?

IV

We're beside ourselves . . . and Jesus is beside us. He seeing what we are seeing, this crowd of challenges. And he asks us, *"Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?"* Jesus asks us! Why?

Phil bursts out: *"Six months' wages wouldn't buy enough to give each person just a mouthful!"* Andy breaks in: *"Look at this sweet lad. He's got his family's lunch. How cute. And useless. (Don't know why I mentioned it.)"* Meeting these needs will require an unbelievable capacity, and what we have is teeny. Apparently, Jesus knows this, both the enormous need and our meagre resources. Then why does he ask us?

Maybe so we can finally realize and admit that what is needed is so much, and what we have is so little.

For us "get 'er done" types, us "We can do anything we set our minds to" types, we who are used to carrying the weight on our shoulders successfully, who are highly motivated, high achieving problem solvers . . . seeing that what is needed is so massively much, and what we have is so laughingly little . . . admitting that is tough. Also, necessary. Seeing our inadequacy. Admitting our inability.

V

Jesus and this crowd were far from any town. It was the wilderness.³ A good place to pasture your flocks. But you cannot live there, not without outside resources.⁴

The Passover festival was very soon. What does that celebrate? When through Moses, God led the people out of slavery. Where did God take them? A wilderness. There, they complained, why? No food. What did God provide for them? They called it manna. The Bible also calls it “bread.”⁵

Jesus leads the crowd into the wilderness. When they’re hungry, he provides them with bread. Sounds familiar?

I notice something else. In the ‘people and Moses in the wilderness’ story, there was always just enough manna. If they tried to take too much, it spoiled. So they learned trust—there will be enough. Also, moderation—take only what you need. Good lessons!

Notice, however, that Jesus makes the five loaves into more than enough. More than enough for everyone to have as much as they wanted. More than enough for everyone to eat their fill. Enough to fill 12 baskets full of leftovers. More than they started with.

With Jesus, there is more than enough.

When we are following him, Jesus gives us more than we need.

VI

Did you catch that? When we are following him, Jesus gives us more than we need.

You know the saying, “*God will never give you more than you can handle.*” That is so wrong! Life throws things at us that we cannot handle. It’s okay to be at your wit’s end, to admit you can’t take it any more.

And that’s just ordinary life stuff, which can hit anyone. On top of that, when we’re following Jesus, we get to stand with him as he draws crowds of needs our way. We have no chance! It will always be more than we can handle. On our best days, we can barely take care of ourselves. He is asking us to do even more. More than our meagre resources can possibly deal with.

Jesus will turn to us, and ask, “How are you going to handle this?”

³ See the tellings of this same episode in Matthew 14:13 and Mark 6:31. The Greek term they use is *erēmos*. The story is also told in Luke 9.

⁴ See the observations about the term “wilderness” in John Goldingay, Old Testament Theology Volume 1: Israel’s Gospel (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 452f.

⁵ Exodus 16.

When we're honest, we'll say "We can't!"

Then Jesus can finally do something with us. When we "get" all we cannot do, Jesus will say, "Good. Watch me!" Then, we'll get to see and become part of what he is doing.

*"God will never give us more than we can handle."*No!

*"God will never give us more than He, Jesus, can handle."*Yes.

When we are following him, Jesus gives us what we need. Amen!