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LORD TO WHOM SHALL WE GO?

John 6

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God is good. His goodness is celebrated throughout the Bible. For example, King David invites us to enjoy his goodness in Ps. 34:8: "Taste and see that the Lord is *good*; how blessed is the one who takes refuge in him!"

God is also rich. He owns "the cattle on a thousand hills" (Ps 50:10), and St. Paul says that God will supply all our needs according to his riches in glory (Phil 4:19).

So it is that many of us first turn to God in need of someone both *good* and *rich*. Without wealthy benefactors, we wonder if maybe God can help. Then we ask of God, he answers our prayers, and that's how seeds of faith get planted.

Unfortunately that's often as far as faith goes. God becomes our rich uncle, helping out whenever we're in material need. Sometimes years after coming to faith, no matter how sophisticated the vocabulary, our prayers still have the depth of a letter to Santa Claus. "Dear Lord, [shopping list], Amen." The nonprofit world euphemistically calls this a "donor relationship." It's not much of a relationship, is it, if all we ever do is ask the Giver for more gifts?

Though I don't own one right now, I have owned a couple of pickup trucks in the past, and I can say from experience that truck owners have a lot of friends! These are "loaner relationships" rather than "donor relationships." Especially in the city, everyone needs a friend with a truck. Of course it's the truck that everybody wants, and not the owner, unless of course the owner is free to help move something heavy. So while truck ownership will make you popular, it's not a means for developing deep friendships.

God wants to go far deeper with us than just a "donor relationship." John says at the end of his Gospel (20:31) that he wrote it so that we might not only *believe* in Jesus, but also *have life* in him. In John's Gospel, life in Jesus flows out of a close, personal relationship with him. In John 6, we will see even more clearly that the best gift of all is the Giver. We are called to enjoy more than simply God's material provision. Our higher calling is to communion as we enjoy the Lord himself.

JESUS GIVES GOOD GIFTS

John 6 is an extraordinarily long chapter, and contains one of the longest recorded speeches of Jesus. In this message we will focus on three key questions from this chapter that highlight what the passage is about. Hopefully this will provide a roadmap for the whole chapter, so that you can read it more slowly and carefully on your own.

The first key question in this passage is the one that Jesus asks Philip his disciple (6:5): “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” Why did Jesus ask this question? It wasn’t because he was looking for the nearest bakery. Instead, he was probing his disciples’ faith.

The disciples had already been with Jesus on some pretty exciting adventures. They had sat under his transformative teaching, and they had seen him perform three miraculous signs. Now, after all that they had witnessed, were they ready to put their full faith in Jesus?

Philip wasn’t. Not yet. From his perspective, they were in an impossible bind. They had retreated with Jesus to a mountain on the far side of the Sea of Galilee. A huge crowd—about 5,000 in number—followed them there because of the miraculous signs that Jesus was performing (6:3). And now, without an event planner on staff, they were on the verge of a humanitarian crisis. Can you imagine the challenges of an unplanned gathering of 5,000 people? It stressed Philip out just thinking about it. In his words (6:7), “Two hundred denarii (nearly a year’s salary) worth of bread would not be enough for each person to get a little.” To Philip, this wasn’t a time for faith, it was time to get practical.

Andrew was a little further along in his faith than Philip. Andrew was the disciple who (6:9) brought to Jesus the boy with the picnic lunch of five barley loaves and two fish. This wasn’t the first time Andrew brought someone to Jesus, nor would it be the last; it’s one of those little details that John wants us to notice in his story. In John 1, it was Andrew who brought his brother Peter to Jesus. And in John 12, it was Andrew who led Gentile seekers to Jesus on Mt. Zion. In this story, Andrew still had his doubts, asking (6:9), “What are these for the needs of so many?” Yet Andrew’s instincts were right. Somehow, by taking what little we have to Jesus, it *will* be more than enough, because you never know what Jesus will do with it. That’s one of the most important discoveries on the journey of faith, namely learning to expect that Jesus “will do something we hadn’t thought of, something new and creative.”¹

What Jesus did with the loaves and fishes is extraordinary, yet it’s also similar to what he already did in John’s Gospel. At a wedding reception (John 2), Jesus did something no one would have expected when the host ran out of wine. Taking what little the host did have—six washtubs filled with water—Jesus transformed the water into very good wine, enough to satisfy everyone present. Jesus redeemed a wedding reception gone wrong, transforming it into a

¹ Tom Wright, *John for Everyone: Part 1, Chapters 1-10*, 73

foretaste of the great and eternal feast that is to come. That miracle at the wedding in Cana was the first of Jesus' signs, one that the disciples could not have forgotten.

Yet on the mountainside in John 6, the disciples appear not to have remembered the wedding in Cana, or perhaps they had not matured in their faith to the point that they could anticipate Jesus doing it again. That's why Jesus tested them with the question about buying bread. He wanted the question front and center as he miraculously provided once again. (v 11) Taking the loaves, he gave thanks, and then distributed them to all the thousands sitting on the mountainside. And then so also with the fish. He multiplied the loaves and fishes, until all the crowd had eaten as much as they wanted.

Just think of what it must have been like that day, at a time when the Roman occupation was causing tremendous fear and unrest throughout the region. The people were so desperate that they left whatever they had been doing in their villages and went out in search of a miracle man in the wilderness. It turned out to be a risk worth taking, because Jesus put on a fabulous party up on the mountain, with a spectacular view of the Sea of Galilee down below, and the lush greenery of spring spreading out on the grass before them. There, in the peace of the Lord, 5,000 people ate their fill of the loaves and fishes!

As the feast was drawing to a close, Jesus turned his attention back to the disciples, who had been busy caring for others in the presence of the Lord. Jesus sent them (v 12) to gather up leftovers, and they collected twelve large baskets full. It was a powerful lesson to them that in being with Jesus while serving others, they would not go hungry themselves.²

The feeding of the 5,000 was such a glorious, unforgettable day, that all four Gospels include this story. Yet in John's Gospel, this story isn't primarily about Jesus' generous provision. We already learned long before about his provision at the wedding in Cana (John 2). This story (John 6) invites us to go further with Jesus in the journey of faith, such that "by believing in him we have life in his name" (John 20:31). John calls us to journey further in faith, beyond the good gifts that Jesus gives us, to commune with the Giver himself.

THE PURPOSE OF PASSOVER

Jesus will explicitly talk about the higher calling to communion in the discourse that begins in 6:25. Before we turn to that, let me point out how John anticipates this higher calling in the story of the loaves and the fishes. At the beginning of the story (6:4), John names the occasion as the great feast of Passover. It's a very important detail for what the whole story is about.

² The disciples' lesson here is a snapshot of the larger message of the entire chapter: when we prioritize being with Jesus and serving others, we can trust Jesus to provide for our needs.

In the original Passover story, found in the Old Testament book of Exodus, God rescued his people for reasons that go far beyond providing for their material needs; in the Exodus, God delivered his people *from* death and destruction, *to* himself, *for* the life of the world. The Passover feast was supposed to commemorate not only God's deliverance, but also his missional purposes. God called the Israelites out of slavery to communion with him, in order that they might become a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, and a light to the Gentiles. In other words, the Passover had a past, a present and a future: God delivered his people *from* death and destruction, *to* himself, *for* the life of the world.

Modern Passover Seders typically don't capture these past, present and future elements. They tend to focus exclusively on remembering God's provision. If you attend a Seder, you'll eat a lot of good food, drink four glasses of kosher wine, and then usually sleep late the next morning.

The first Passover was very different. The original instructions for Passover read like marching orders. In fact, that's exactly what they were:

In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. (Exodus 12:11)

Do you ever have a big day ahead, and instead of sitting down at the table to eat your breakfast, you find yourself standing in the middle of the kitchen, dressed and ready to go, gulping it down so you can get out the door? That's the way they were supposed to eat the Passover as well. The focus of the Passover wasn't supposed to be on the gifts, but on the Giver. They needed to eat something quickly so that they might march out with the Lord on a grand adventure of faith. God was delivering his people *from* death and destruction, *to* himself, *for* the life of the world.

In John's Gospel, Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 feels a lot like the modern Passover Seder, in that the multitudes were focused more on the gifts than the Giver. The crowd ate their fill on the mountainside, and then they went to sleep. As they stretched out on the grass beneath the stars, they figured that the only thing better than one day of feasting on the mountain would be doing it again the next day, and the next, and the next. So they began to imagine making Jesus their king, in order to keep a good thing going. They wanted his ongoing gifts.

Jesus, however, had no interest in being that kind of king. In v 15, he slipped away, in order to pray, and then to continue teaching his disciples about the full journey of faith. He was calling them to a faith that goes beyond the gifts to the giver himself, so that "by believing in him they would have life in his name" (John 20:31).

THE BEST GIFT IS THE GIVER

Now let's look at the second half of the chapter, beginning in v 25, where Jesus explicitly calls us to communion with the Giver of good gifts. He does so in response to a question posed by the crowds. This is the second key question we will consider. It's found in 6:28, when the crowds asked Jesus, "What must we do to be doing the works of God?"

At first glance, it appears that the crowds had been doing the right thing because they were following Jesus. The prior evening, Jesus and the disciples had crossed over the sea to Capernaum. The next morning, when the multitudes discovered that Jesus had gone, they too decided to follow Jesus, just as the Twelve had done. They left the mountainside behind and set sail for Capernaum, where they eventually found Jesus teaching in the synagogue.

Why did the crowds follow Jesus? We may be able to guess peoples' motives from time to time, but we can't know for certain anyone's motives other than our own. Jesus, however, is the God-man, and he really does know the intentions of our hearts. In John 6, he really did know why the crowds had decided to follow him. He said in v 26: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." In other words, they were still seeking the gifts and not the Giver, so Jesus challenged them on it.

In response, they asked the big question in 6:28: Then "what must we do to be doing the works of God?" It's a great question. It's foundational for all people of faith. What does God want from us? How does he want us to follow him?

If there's anyone who ought to be able to answer that question, it's Jesus. We've heard repeatedly in previous chapters of John's Gospel that Jesus was with the Father in the beginning, and he came from the Father to be with us, in order to show us what God is like. He is the living temple, through whom all people everywhere can draw near to God. Since Jesus comes to us with firsthand, intimate knowledge of God the Father, we can trust him to know what we must do to be doing the works of God.

Take a look at what Jesus says we should do (v 29): "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."

It's a fascinating answer, particularly in light of the Reformation debates about justification—whether by faith or good works. Jesus' answer sounds like a Protestant slogan: that the "work" of God *is* faith. But what does he mean? If the work God wants us to do is to believe in Jesus, what does believing in Jesus entail? Apparently what the multitudes were doing when they followed Jesus to Capernaum wasn't enough. What more was required to "believe in the one whom God had sent?"

Jesus spelled it out in the section that follows, and it turns out that in a way there *is* work involved in true faith, because believing in Jesus requires cultivating a relationship with him.

Just like any close friendship, faith in Jesus means investing regular time in your relationship with him, daily opening your heart to him through prayer, honestly sharing your fears and failures, hopes and desires, praises and thanksgivings, as well as your shopping list. It means listening to him as he speaks through the Scriptures, whether in private reading, or in community settings such as this one. This is the way our faith in Jesus is cultivated. It's the work of God. If you're not doing this work, then it's very likely that you're not growing in faith.

Yet like any good friendship, the work involved in cultivating a relationship with Jesus is totally worth the effort. In fact, the closer the relationship, the less the "work" involved even feels like work. We want to do it. We want to go out of our way to be with our friends and to open our hearts to them and to listen to them, because the bonds of friendship run so deep. We like spending time together, so we do what it takes to make it happen. And that's how we ought to conceive of faith in Jesus.

Not only does Jesus love you, he also likes you as well. If you will read the Bible and take Jesus at his word, then you will have no doubt about this. He wants you to come to him, to find rest in him, and to receive his love. The only question that remains is how you feel about him.

That's why throughout the rest of the chapter Jesus returns to the theme of desire. Jesus already talked about desire at length with the Samaritan woman in John 4. Even though she kept drinking from Jacob's well, the Samaritan woman never seemed to get enough water. She also had run through five husbands, and was currently with a sixth man who wasn't her husband. Yet she still wasn't satisfied, as evidenced by the way she was talking with Jesus, the Jewish stranger from Nazareth. Jesus helped the woman trace her desires back to their source, beyond thirst, beyond loneliness, back to communion with God. And then he said to her, "I who speak to you am he." He showed her that it was communion with God that she was longing for most of all.

Jesus took a very similar approach with the crowd in John 6. He argued that there is a hunger we all share that will never be satisfied by barley loaves and fish. Only communion with God can satisfy it. Consider what he said in these verses:

"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." (6:35)

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." (6:53-54)

In retrospect, it's perfectly clear that what Jesus was talking about was the picture of communion that we have in the Lord's Supper, the Passover meal that Jesus would soon give to his disciples. On Easter, when Jesus is raised from the dead, the Lord's Supper will forever become a central aspect of Christian worship. The risen Lord Jesus will meet (in Luke 24) a

couple on the road to Emmaus. They won't recognize him at first. Along the way, he will speak to them from the Old Testament about how he had to suffer and die and be resurrected on the third day. Then when they sit down to a meal together, Jesus' identity will be revealed to them at the breaking of bread. From that day forward, the church will continue this feast following the same pattern: communing with Jesus first through the exposition of his Word (in sermons) and then afterwards communing with him at the Lord's table. This is the Christian Passover. Through both Word and Sacrament, we remember our past, present and future: Christ has delivered us *from* death and destruction, *to* himself, *for* the life of the world. We will feed on his word together, and share this meal together, until Jesus comes again and we join with all the saints in the marriage supper of the Lamb.

We can see in retrospect that in John 6 Jesus was talking about the Lord's Supper. But what was he trying to convey that day to the crowds? I believe that he was doing for them the same thing that he did for the Samaritan woman. He was helping them trace their desires back to the source, beyond hunger for loaves and fishes, back to communion with God. And that, by the way, is also what we're up to whenever we feast together on Word and Sacrament.³ We're tracing our desires back to the source. What's more fundamental to my life than the gifts of bread and wine? Communion with the Giver.

What must we do to be doing the works of God? We must believe in the one whom he has sent. What does that look like? Hungering and thirsting for the Giver even more than his gifts.

EPILOGUE

At the very end of the chapter, there's a brief epilogue. By this point, Jesus had a great many "disciples," but in many cases they wanted only the gifts and not the Giver. When they heard Jesus' teaching that they were to hunger for him even more than for loaves and fishes, they said (v. 60), "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" And John notes (6:65) that "after this many of [Jesus'] disciples turned back and no longer walked with him." Jesus, therefore, posed one more key question to "The Twelve" who remained.⁴ Jesus asked them (6:67), "Do you want to go away as well?" Jesus' question crystallizes the dilemma of our desires. What do we want more? Do we want to do our own thing, or will we hunger and thirst for the Giver even more than his gifts?

³ This is why we sometimes sing songs that focus our desires on God. E.g. "Lord, You are more precious than silver; Lord, You are more costly than gold; Lord, You are more beautiful than diamonds; And nothing I desire compares with You."

⁴ Those who remained are identified by John as "The Twelve" here for the first time. They presumably get this title because they were the twelve who stuck around after everyone else left.

In 6:68-69, Peter's response constitutes a simple confession of faith, a pledge of allegiance for all who believe and seek life in Jesus' name. If you want to move beyond the gifts to the Giver, going back to the very source of your desires, then Peter's response is a creed worth repeating until you know it by heart. With Peter and all those who have gone before us in the company of the saints, we say:

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. All four Gospels tell the story of the feeding of the 5,000. John's purpose in telling this story is revealed by the broader context in John 6, as well in light of the prior stories in John 1-5. What is John trying to show readers with this story? Have you ever thought about how the four Evangelists may use these stories in different ways to teach us more about the Lord?
2. Why is it important that the feeding of the 5,000 happened on the occasion of the Feast of Passover (6:4)? What similarities are there between this story and the Exodus? What do the crowds who follow Jesus in John 6 and the Israelites in the Wilderness have in common?
3. How is the Christian celebration of the Lord's Supper a fitting continuation of the Passover Feast?
4. What "work" is involved in believing in Jesus? Does this undermine the Protestant conception of justification by faith? How do faith and work fit together within the covenant of marriage? How does marriage help explain the relationship between faith and work in Jesus' relationship with the bride of Christ?