

**An Appetite for Love**  
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**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
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**John 6:1-21**

Love is remarkable. Love prompts us to do unlikely, even miraculous things.

There's parental love. Because we have love, parents willingly (well, some more willingly than others!) change smelly diapers; they sit long hours at sporting and musical events that not only never end, but have no discernable action or excitement: tee-balls that don't get hit; soccer goal posts that make for great dandy-lion picking, dance recitals that have so many precious children – but my goodness, where do they all keep coming from!?!

There's love between two spouses. Partners watch bad television shows, unbearably bad television shows; they smile, even when their partner uses too many paper towels. They clean dirty pieces of Tupperware -- the ones with dried yogurt or week-old kale, even when it would be much easier to just throw them away and spend \$1.50 at Food Lion for some new ones.

There's love between friends. Who needs Uber, U-Haul, or Pet-Smart when your friends can get you to the airport, or help you move that couch, or pet-sit?

Love compels us to think of the needs of those whom we care about. In our closest relationships, we encounter people with whom we can be vulnerable, people who are empathetic to our needs and desires, and people who find great satisfaction in responding to our needs and desires. We do the little things mentioned earlier because we know that those whom we love would gladly do the same for us.

Today's lection, and in fact the whole of John's gospel, introduces us to a God whose primary substance is love. Jesus would applaud the love and empathy we offer to our closest friends and family members. But that's not the kind of love that makes Jesus' ministry unique. Here's what is: Jesus encourages us to stretch the limits of our compassion. That means loving the people we don't know. And it even means loving people we may not like.

After five chapters of healing and preaching, word is spreading about Jesus. This morning, as we meet up with Jesus and the disciples, a large crowd, five thousand-strong, has gathered to lay eyes on this compelling prophet from the Galilee. We're also told it's Passover, a remembrance of God's mighty acts during the Exodus from Egypt.

Jesus surveys the crowd. And that makes sense. Anyone would want to gather their thoughts before speaking to so large an audience. But here's what's interesting. Jesus isn't like most powerful people (politicians, evangelists, entertainers). He isn't concerned with how the press will receive his remarks, or if there will be a good soundbite, or if there's plenty of crowd control to keep him safe. He's worried about the needs of neighbors he's never met.

He wonders: "Wow, that's a lot of people! Do you think they have something to eat?"

Not many important people would ask that question.

This fall, as our political candidates make their stop at fair grounds and convention centers to greet large crowds, many of whom will have waited patiently for hours, I doubt that much consideration will be given to their hunger pangs – dollars are better spent on media and security. The focus will not be on the crowd, but rather the crowd being seen with the candidate.

But Jesus is different. He is not wondering how this crowd will serve his best interests, but rather, how he'll serve them. Jesus doesn't just respond to needs, he recognizes them and pursues healing solutions.

Jesus must have chaired the food services committee of a Baptist church. And like many of us, Jesus must have had a really good grandmother: Jesus sees feeding others as a tangible sign of love and healing.

He says to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for all these people to eat?"

John tells us this question is a test. Jesus immediately sees an opportunity to minister to the basic needs of a large crowd. But Philip this as an impossible task, an enormous burden.

"Jesus," he says, "Not even six months wages would do it – it would cost that much just to give everyone a spoonful of peanut butter."

Another disciple, Andrew, has moved to the next logical step. Maybe some of the crowd packed a lunch. But he quickly reports that all they've identified is a young boy with five loaves and two fish – the ancient equivalent of a sleeve of saltines and a few cans of Vienna sausages. What good would so little do amidst such great need?

How soon we forget what God can do with even the smallest gifts. And how ironic that the disciples would forget on Passover. God provides. During the Exodus, God provided safe passage and manna in the wilderness. And had not both Elisha and Elijah been known to multiply foodstuffs with God's help?

Even in the midst of the one John calls the Word made flesh, the disciples fail to grasp the possibilities of God's realm. God's kingdom is not bound to economics; it is bound to love. Jesus will not dismiss the potential of ministry because of a cost analysis. "Think bigger. Act bigger. Love bigger," he says. After assembling the crowd in circles on the grassy lawn, Jesus takes this small offering of food, offers thanks, and begins to distribute it. The food doesn't run out. As a matter of fact, everyone in the crowd, all 5,000 people are satisfied. And not only that, there are 12 baskets of bread left over.

When we dwell in God's presence, all are fed, no matter how big the crowd, no matter how meager the resources.

Too often, we concern ourselves with the how of God's miracles. We cannot have faith in their occurrence without tangible evidence.

Well there's a simple explanation, we say:

People saw the example of the young boy offering his lunch pale, and that simple act of kindness inspired everyone to follow suit. People shared, and in their sharing, there was an abundance. Doesn't that happen each time we have a potluck supper?

If we try a little harder, we can offer more creative explanations:

Well, we say, John never said that Jesus didn't purchase this food. It just says it came from him. Maybe he didn't create the extra abundance, but rather his presence inspired people to donate their monies, and one of the disciples made a road trip to a near-by Costco.

The text never says how big the barley loaves are. Maybe this young man's mother gave him a gift card to Blimpie's, and he offered Jesus five six-foot-long party subs. That would feed a bunch of people.

A few years ago, I was in a Bible Study that postulated on the two fish. A straw poll determined that not one of the fifteen people in our classroom that day liked sardines. Maybe it only takes two fish to feed five thousand people, because there's just not too much demand for fish!

To seek the tangible, rational answers for God's miracles is to ignore their power, and to ignore their miraculous, unexplainable nature. John tells us in his prologue:

"The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

In other words, God, in the person of Jesus, dwelled (and still dwells) among us. And one of the great truths of Jesus, is that he empathized with, recognized, and responded to the needs of others.

Jesus showed us, that in God's presence all things are possible. Blind men see. Samaritan women with shady pasts find community and acceptance. Great multitudes – those who hunger and thirst – find lasting physical and spiritual nourishment. Love provides, and love solves, because love brings God into the equation.

In God's presence, our compassion is multiplied, our resources are multiplied, our potential is multiplied – and if we open ourselves to that possibility, God's Kingdom is manifested here on earth.

Today's passage reveals so many remarkable things about Jesus: In twenty-one verses, he feeds five thousand, he declines kingship, he calms the sea, he walks on water, and in even in the midst of all that action, he finds time to take a nap. But still, those elements aren't the ones that speak to me this morning. It's his sense of empathy.

Jesus intuitively understands the basic needs of strangers. He sees the importance of feeding them. I joked about the love for the people closest to us. The beauty in these relationships is that we can intuitively respond to the needs of those whom we love. That intuition is a gift and a grace both to give AND to receive.

But this passage gets me thinking: "What if we could learn to be empathetic to the needs of ALL those in our community, especially the ones we don't know, and have never tried to engage?"

What happens when we engage the Samaritan women of our community in conversation? What happens when we invite the Nicodemus' of our world to fellowship in daylight hours? What happens

when we celebrate with the blind and the lame and the possessed even when their healing isn't celebrated by the Temple establishment?

What happens when begin to put names and faces with children separated from their parents by cruel and poorly-planned immigration policies? What happens when hear the stories and pray the prayers of those who walk the streets in search of shelter, or hospital hallways in search of healing, or lonely parlors in search of friendship?

What happens when we choose to see the humanity in others, and proclaim their pain is our pain, their love is our love, their world is our world, too?

I think what happens is that we channel the Christ who fed the multitudes.

And when we live with such empathy, when we dare to trust that our small gifts will be multiplied by God's presence, miracles happen.

The doubters proclaim: "Five loaves and two fish will never be enough."

Those who live in God's presence respond: "It's all we need."

May it always be so! Amen.