

Michael Gehring
“Passing the Test”
John 6: 1-21
Main Street UMC, Kernersville, NC
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I was on a tour of the Holy Land. You know how it is on these tours. You're packed in the bus like a bunch of sardines, and the tour bus driver is attempting to give you as much information as possible so that when you get to the sight, he won't have to yell over all the other tourists who are taking rapid fire pictures just like you.

One of my favorite sites was Tabga, which is the traditional site of the feeding of five thousand men just five loaves and two fish. It's right there on the Sea of Galilee, with green grassy slopes. The area, unlike so many other areas, hasn't been badly overtaken by commercialism. The first church built on the site was built in 350 AD. That church stood until 450 AD, when a larger church was built. The floors of the church were made of beautiful mosaics and the most famous of these is of a bread basket surrounded by two fish. In 614, when the Persians swung down from what is now Iran, the church was destroyed. For thirteen hundred years the mosaics remained hidden under earth and mud, until German archaeologists discovered them. The mosaics were cleaned up and a new church was built over them to protect them.

When we got back on the bus, as we were traveling to Tiberius, the tour guide, who was not a Christian, said, *“You know some of your own protestant theologians have said that the miracle Jesus performed that day was not the multiplication of the loaves and fish to feed five thousand. The miracle Jesus performed was that he inspired all of those people to share the loaves and fish that they had hidden underneath their garments.”*

And the first thing I thought was, *“Dude, you're raining down on my Wheaties. I came to the Holy Land to meet the Resurrected Lord, not to get rehashed 18th and 19th century continental thought which dismissed, discredited, and diminished one of the 2 natures of Jesus.”*

In my office there are two busts. The one bust is so predictable. It's a bust of C.S. Lewis. Lewis was a Church of England layperson who strongly reacted against modernist theology which attempted to strip the Gospel of the supernatural. Lewis in a lecture in 1945 in Wales told a group of Anglican youth-workers and priests, *“Do not attempt to water Christianity down. There must no pretence that you can have it with the Supernatural left out.”*

The other bust in my office is of Albert Schweitzer, a 20th theologian, organist, musicologist, and medical doctor. He was truly was a polymath. A friend gave me the bust because she knew just how much I admired Schweitzer's thought and life. Schweitzer in 1906 published *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* which to this day is still required reading in many theological schools. Schweitzer argued that the quest of the historical Jesus in fact produced portraits of Jesus that look a lot like 18th and 19th century European theologians. They produced images of Jesus that looked a lot like themselves. Schweitzer was spot-on.

You know that's a temptation for all of us isn't it? We don't really want to let Jesus be Jesus. We want a Jesus that looks a whole lot like us. We want an American Jesus. It's not an accident that the prosperity gospel originated in Tulsa, OK, an oil boom and bust town. The main proponents of that in the 1980's were Kenneth Copeland and Kenneth Hagin. I like to refer to their thought as Copenhagen theology.

I love that line from *the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. One of the children ask Mr. Beaver is Aslan safe? "*Safe? Who said anything about safe? Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.*"

Now the disciples, at that point in the narrative, didn't know the rest of the story like we do. They had not yet met the Lord of the Resurrection.

What you hear in their words is incredulousness that Jesus would ask such a thing of them. Jesus is giving Philip a test, but who of us could have passed that test? Who of us could have expected such largesse, such compassion, such power from a carpenter's son from Nazareth? When Jesus asked, where can we buy bread for all these people to eat? Philip answered, "*Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.*" Andrew then said, "*Well there is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?*"

What you hear in the disciples' words is the sheer impossibility of the task before them. There is no way they can feed such a large crowd of people. What you hear in the disciples' words is despair. What good are five loaves and two fish when there are so many people to feed?

Despair is no stranger to us. It is very easy for us to look at all the needs of the world, and throw up our hands, saying there is just no way. No way that we can make a difference. No way to solve the problems of our generation. Sometimes when I look at it, I suffer the blues.

And sometimes when I get too overwhelmed by it all, I remember that rookie. He rode on the bench of the Chicago Bulls watching Michael Jordan play an outstanding game. Jordan was scoring like crazy. He scored sixty-eight points. The rookie sat on the bench the whole game until the last

minute when he went in, and in the final seconds of the game made a free throw for one point. When he was being interviewed in the post-game show, the rookie was so pleased with how the game went. *“Together”* he said, *“Michael Jordan and I scored sixty-nine points.”*

Dorothy Day was an agnostic writer in the early twentieth century who was a good friend of Eugene O’Neil. She looked at all the despair of the world, of all the broken relationships, of which she had her fair share, of all the heartache, of all the pain, she looked deep into it all and on the other side she found God. She converted to Roman Catholicism and went to work in the inner city of New York, feeding those that only Jesus could love.

One response to seeing the tragedy and pain of the world is to be overwhelmed by it, despair, and throw up one’s hands and walk away.

Another response is Emmanuel, God is with us. We are not alone, and we do not live by our own power. The child in the Gospel knew that the need was greater than he could meet, so he gave Jesus what he had, five loaves and two fish, and he trusted Jesus to do the rest.

That’s where we are in this day and time when the needs are so great, when the church is in decline in the West, and the culture behaves like practical atheists, in such a time as this, we’re called to remember who we are and whose we are. We’re called to be the light of Christ in a dark world, offering our gifts and our service and trusting God to do the rest.