

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost; July 28, 2024
+ John 6:1-15 +
“Dear Jesus, Work to Make Us Strong”

After this, Jesus crossed over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (or Tiberias). A large crowd followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he was performing on those who were sick. Jesus went up on the hillside and sat down there with his disciples. The Jewish Passover was near.

When Jesus looked up and saw a huge crowd coming toward him, he asked Philip, “Where can we buy bread for these people to eat?” But Jesus was saying this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.

Philip answered him, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to have just a little.”

One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, “There’s a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what is that for so many people?”

Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, so they sat down. There were about five thousand men.

Then Jesus took the loaves and, after giving thanks, he distributed pieces to those who were seated. He also did the same with the fish – as much as they wanted.

When the people were full, he told his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over so that nothing is wasted.” So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with pieces from the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

When the people saw the miraculous sign Jesus did, they said, “This really is the Prophet who is coming into the world.”

When Jesus realized that they intended to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

It is generally true that the easier a question is to ask, the less useful the answer will be. One of the easiest – and most useless – questions we can ask is: “How could they?” Useless as it is, it is a question we love to ask because it focuses us on the failings of others. And it is our fallen nature to want to dwell on the failings of others.

Did you find yourself asking yourself that question as you listened to the Gospel today? “How could they,” is such an easy question to ask. How could they – all of Jesus’ disciples, Philip and Andrew especially – be so negative and doubtful? How could they say such things to Jesus? **“Two hundred denarii [roughly \$30,000] would not be enough for them to have just a little.” “There’s a boy here with five barley loaves and two fish, but what is that for so many people?”** How could they? What’s wrong with them? Don’t they know whom they’re speaking to? They do know! They have heard John the Baptist call him the Lamb of God; they know he has come to take away the sin of the world. They know Jesus can solve that problem of sin for them, the most serious problem of all. But they have also seen Jesus solve small problems too. They have seen him rescue a wedding by turning water into exquisite wine. In the grand scheme of things, that’s a much smaller problem than the sin of the world. But Jesus solved that one, too. And they have

seen that Jesus does pick and choose whom he loves and whom he helps. They know this too because not long before, when the disciples returned from grocery shopping, they discovered Jesus speaking to a social outcast – and a Samaritan, at that! – turning her to himself for salvation. The disciples were surprised to see Jesus speaking to her because, in their view, if there was ever someone not to care about, she was the one. But Jesus loves even her.

This is all in the past; the disciples have seen it and heard it all. They know who Jesus is. They know the power and care and love that he has for all. So how could they? How could they, when a hungry crowd looked to them for food, be so doubtful and negative?

The simple answer is that they could because sinners are capable of all depths and levels and evil. They were fallen creatures and sinfully forgetful, who were also under pressure. So as shocking as it seems, they could easily do it. They could naturally do it. Even with the Son of God right there, even with all they knew about his identity, his power, his care for all.

But, you know, there is a much more useful question to ask than “How could they?” And that is: “How can we?” And don’t be so arrogant to think if you were standing there with the disciples, you would do or said anything better. Because you have been there, in scarce times, under pressure, and done and said the same in doubt and negativity. And you’ve done it knowing who Jesus is, knowing his power, knowing his love for all. To be honest, we’ve all done it, and we’ve done it under much less pressure than the disciples did. We have become doubtful and negative that God will give us what we need, and we’ve done under less pressure than having five thousand or so hungry people looking to us to feed them. We’ve done when the paycheck was just a little short, when an illness lingered for just a little while.

How could we? Do we not know who Jesus is? Do we not know that our Redeemer lives? Do we not know that he lives to supply all our needs? We do! Do we not believe that? We do! What’s wrong with us, then? How could we? We could and we have because share the same fallen nature as Philip and Andrew and the other ten disciples. A fallen nature that sinfully doubts, that wrongfully forgets who Jesus is (God himself!) what he can do (anything!) and how much he cares (infinitely!).

But now for the most useful and important question of all: How could he? How could Jesus? It might seem at first glance like the closing sentence of the Gospel is a bit of a throwaway line, not as important as Jesus miraculously feeding the five thousand men, besides women and children. But this is actually important and amazing, too: **When Jesus realized that they intended to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.** I believe this statement helps explain another line earlier in the Gospel, which may seem at first like a needless detail: **The Jewish Passover Festival was near.** What happened on the Passover? Pilgrims from all over Israel ascended to the capital of Jerusalem. The sheer number of visitors to the city during the Passover put the Roman authorities on edge every year because they knew: we may have really big swords, but there comes a point where there’s just too many people to control. During the Passover, the possibility of revolt, of setting up a new, native ruler in Jerusalem, was very real. The same crowds that Jesus just stuffed with bread and fish would love to carry him on their shoulders to the capital for the upcoming Passover and set him up as their new king – a kind Jewish king who had the power to squish the hated Romans and fill his subjects’ bellies from thin air.

They wanted him to be their earthly king so much that they were willing to force it on him. And Jesus “withdrew” – a word that implies fleeing. He ran and hid from an earthly throne. How could he? Well, you might say, there are other examples in history of people who voluntarily turned down political power.

During the Roman Republic, there was a senator named Cincinnatus who turned down the offer of absolute power. More to our American interest, George Washington turned down a third term as President, which he would have won. But here's the difference: Cincinnatus turned down political power to return to his peaceful farm and later have a mediocre city in Ohio named after him. And George Washington turned down power to return to his peaceful farm and later have a much better city named after him. Jesus Christ turned down the throne to be rejected by the same people who once wanted him to be king. He turned down this power to be spat on and punched and mocked and nailed to a cross.

How could he? He could – and he did – do that because his love for you is just that huge and perfect. It is so perfect that he prefers to rule your heart with his grace, and to conquer your spiritual enemies for you: to save you from your sin, to rescue you from the devil's power, to conquer your death by his own resurrection.

This is the Jesus who stands on the far side of Galilee with thousands of hungry people turning their eyes to him. So of course he feeds them. This is the Jesus who still stands with you in every need. So of course he always gives you what he knows is best for you, including everything you truly need.

And yet the disciples doubt and complain. And so have we. We need to watch and listen to what the Son of God does and says. And we need to watch for two reasons, because Jesus is multi-tasking in this Gospel. In the first place, he is working to be our perfect substitute, the righteousness of God lived in our place. How quickly we doubt and complain. What does Jesus do? He remains perfectly calm. As the disciples fail his test, he passes the Father's. **When Jesus looked up and saw a huge crowd coming toward him, he asked Philip, "Where can we buy bread for these people to eat?" But Jesus was saying this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.** Not only is Jesus perfectly calm and confident, he also remains thankful, even under stressful circumstances where it appears the Father has not given enough: **Then Jesus took the loaves and, after giving thanks, he distributed pieces to those who were seated. He also did this with the fish – as much as they wanted.** Not only is he perfectly confident and thankful, do you notice Jesus feeds the crowd first? And he not only feeds them first, he feeds them generously. He is our perfection! Flawless trust, thanks, selflessness, and generosity – all in our place.

But Jesus is doing even more! Do you see him working for his disciples? He wants them to understand better. He is working to build their faith stronger, forcing them to work this through in their brains and in their hearts. Why should we be thinking about what we can buy when we have God with us? Why did I ever doubt? Now I'm standing with this basket of leftovers! And so are all eleven of my friends! Why did I ever complain when this crowd is now stuffed?

And Jesus isn't just working to strengthen the faith of his original disciples. He is working to strengthen our faith, too. This story is history. It happened. The Son of God multiplied a few loaves and fish to fill thousands of bellies, and left his disciples standing with leftovers. Know and believe who this Jesus is. Know and believe that he cares for you in every aspect at all times. Know that he has the power as the Son of God to give you everything you really need.

Jesus is always working through the Word to strengthen our trust in him to provide all we need. Remember this from his Word: he turned down a throne in Jerusalem to die and rise for us, so that we will gather around his throne in heaven. See his power as God and his love for you in all its glory in the words of Scripture. And today, and every chance you get, receive his body and blood to build your faith.

Jesus has never stopped working to build the faith of his followers: he is the omnipotent and perfectly loving, saving God. He has given us all we need for eternity, and will give us all we need for this world.

Dear Jesus, build our faith and make it strong, so we trust you with full confidence, remaining thankful always, selfless and generous. Build our faith with your Word and Supper, and keep making it stronger until we see your power and love on high. Amen.