

Year B Proper 17 2024 Provision and Power John 6 vv1 to 21

Provision and power. That's what we see from Jesus today. Provision and power: beyond our human abilities, even beyond our human understanding. And yet...and yet, we continue to try to claim ownership of this God who cannot be owned. We continue to try to tame this God who cannot be tamed. We continue to try to bend this God to our will, to fit this God into our boxes. It cannot be done. It can't be done. Provision and power: the *abundant* provision and *unfathomable* power of our God. And we live in this God's kingdom. Let's find out what that astounding realization means for our lives.

The first thing we notice is that a large crowd is following Jesus. We're even told the reason: They're following Jesus because of the signs he is doing with the sick. Well, it may escape our notice but that is not a great reason to be following someone. That is a very, "What's in for me?" sort of reason, a "Let's be entertained, let's see what else this guy's got" sort of reason. None of those reasons is admirable, none of those says, "This is the one who will mend the world, the Messiah, the one to follow even when times are tough." The disturbing part, I think, is that those less than admirable reasons for the large crowd following Jesus way back then are still, very much, often the less than admirable reasons for large crowds following Jesus in our time: the entertainment value of worship services, the fulfillment of "my" needs, this is what "I" like to experience while in church, I expect God to answer my prayers in the way that I've laid out...

The good news is that Jesus knows why they are following after him and that doesn't stop him. The shallowness of their personal desires is drowned in the

depths of his compassion for them. Jesus turns to Philip and doesn't ask, "Should we feed them?" but, rather, "How shall we feed them?"

This word, "test" that we hear – Jesus was testing Philip – doesn't have the negative implications that might pop into our minds. Jesus wasn't out to trip him up or show him up. Jesus wanted to know where his thinking was at, wanted to challenge Philip to think beyond human limitations. Philip gives quite an understandable response. Our small little group does not have the means to meet the needs of so many people, he says. We simply don't have enough, he says. Sound familiar?

Then Andrew chimes in. Well, he offers, we do have five barley loaves and a couple of fish. But then the limitations of human thinking catch up with him and he falters: "You're right," he says. "We don't have enough." We don't have enough.

Jesus then shows us that the little we have *is* enough with God in God's kingdom. Back in 2015, the people of Hereford, England experienced this first hand. The Rev. Matthew Cashmore tells their story. "We saw the horrendous, heart breaking pictures and videos from Calais, France, of desperate refugees gathered on the coast of France trying to get to the UK. The big international aid agencies were essentially banned from helping and the French and British governments were trying to do everything they could to break up the large camp that had been established – they succeeded and dispersed 10,000 desperate people along the Calais – Dunkirk coast.

What could we do? What could we hope to do for 10,000 people in another country? We started with prayer. We gave thanks for Jesus in our lives and then we started doing the small things in front of us. We collected sleeping bags. We collected food. We drove out to Calais and gave it out.

That was a tiny scratch in the problem in front of us, but we continued to do the small things in front of us. Many people were doing these small things and over time those small things started to add up and a group called People In Motion grew out of those small things. People In Motion – amongst other small charities – drew together lots of people who were doing small things and they are just one small part of lots of other people doing small things and now in Calais there is a distribution point, a warehouse and people on the ground trying their best to make an impossible situation better. They do it through prayer, through love and through the small things in front of them. And because of that 5000 people get a hot meal every day.

Jesus shows us that the little we have *is* enough with God in God's kingdom. And he began with prayer. In an amazingly stone-filled land, the vast multitude had enough grass to sit on and Jesus gave thanks, broke the bread, and gave it to the people to eat their fill. And likewise with the fish. Everyone had enough to eat because God is abundantly generous and, in God's kingdom, everyone has enough. Those who have, share with those who don't and the little we have to give *is* enough.

Jesus instructs the disciples to gather up all the food that was not eaten and there were 12 basketsful of the leftovers. Of course there were 12 baskets of leftovers. Twelve is the number signifying the perfect unity of the people of God – the perfect unity they have when they completely rely on God and follow God's ways...the 12 tribes of Israel...the 12 disciples...

And God had tried to establish this perfect unity...this perfect three-way relationship between God, the people, and the land when, choosing Moses to lead them, God brought his people out of the slavery of empire in Egypt into a land

where they would live in peace: caring for everyone instead of clashing; sharing resources instead of competing for more...The great Exodus from Egypt was Israel's big opportunity to be the counter-cultural community of love and peace, living with God and each other according to God's ways. But they blew it. They were human like us and they couldn't let go of the ways of empire – creating a society with different levels of social and economic status. Just like us: Jesus died to defeat the ways of empire and yet we cling to those ways creating a society with different levels of social and economic status. They were just like us.

So, God sent us prophets. "Turn back to me and to my ways," he pleaded through these prophets. Your ways lead to death, he warned. Your ways lead to oppression, to greed, to wars, to destruction. One such prophet was Elisha. He did many wondrous acts through the power of God. Elisha miraculously fed 100 people with just 20 small little barley loaves. The great Exodus with Moses, the feeding of a multitude with Elisha – the echoes of these events weren't lost on the crowd gathered around Jesus. He'd taken things to a new level. Elisha had fed 100 people. Jesus fed thousands of people with less food. "Wow," the crowd begins to say. "This is the guy – this is the prophet God said would come into the world. This is the Messiah who will redeem Israel, bring us back to the glory days when we lived with God before we blew it. This is the guy who will defeat our oppressors, end poverty, end injustice."

"When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, because back then the Messiah was presumed to also be a king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself." This huge crowd wants Jesus to be king – to fight against their oppressors, to make everything right. But that is thinking the human way – it's always been done this way so this must be the right

way to do things. That is putting human limitations on God – trying to claim God in a way that *we* understand. They want to make him king according to earthly thinking and Jesus will have none of that. After God had rescued the people from Egypt and they cried out for a king, God tried to warn them against this. “You don’t need a king. You only need God. A king will take the best of all you have for himself. A king will abuse his power. The ways of human power are flawed.” But the people insisted. They got their king...one king after another...and even the best – David – the ancestor of the Messiah – even David abused his power. By rejecting being crowned as a human king and exiting the scene, Jesus leaves us with the image of what we are meant to embrace. We turn our gaze back to the grassy field where thousands of people shared a meal, all of them sitting together, all of them having enough. Peace. Equality. Abundance. God’s kingdom. God’s ways.

In the meantime, the disciples get into a boat to head to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. *They leave behind the one they are supposedly following.* They leave Jesus behind – not a great look for his “devoted” disciples. But, again, Jesus doesn’t let human failings stop him. He provided all that the crowd needed and now he’s going to do the same for his disciples in a very different way.

He comes walking on the water toward the boat. The disciples are three or four miles into a tough battle with rough water and they see Jesus walking toward them. They are terrified, we are told. “It is I,” Jesus says to them. It is I. Do not be afraid. Jesus is not introducing himself to them. They know it’s Jesus walking toward them. They have recognized him. Their beloved leader is walking on the water three or four miles from shore and they are afraid of the power they are witnessing. Why? Who has the ability to walk on water? Jesus tells them: “It is I.” That doesn’t have the “oomph” in English of what the disciples heard that evening. “I Am” is what

they heard. The great “I Am” – the God of Israel who freed his people from Empire. The God who spoke to Moses from the burning bush. When Moses asked God, “Who should I tell them is sending me?”, God answered, “Tell them ‘I Am. I Am is sending you.’” Who walks on water? God walks on water.

Jesus tells them not to be afraid of this astounding power they are witnessing and, “Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.” They wanted to take Jesus – just as the crowd earlier had wanted to take Jesus, put human limits on God, try to claim God in a way that we understand. Just as Jesus avoided being taken by the crowd, he avoids being taken by his disciples. Their boat mysteriously is suddenly on the shore.

“We learn [today] that Jesus provides more than we can anticipate and that he does not submit to our small definitions,” (Alicia Myers, workingpreacher.org). When we think we have things well in hand and we end up leaving Jesus behind, he does not abandon us. He comes to us and reveals himself to us, and provides a way forward that we cannot explain. “Rather than claiming Jesus as one we can control and keep in our boats, we recognize that Jesus reveals himself to be so much more” (Myers). We cannot push what we want on Jesus. He calls us into relationship – a lifetime of listening and learning, of getting to know God, and making mistakes along the way but always called back to the great “I Am”. Provision and power. God’s kingdom. God’s ways. That’s just what we need. Indeed, that is all we need.