

# “LOAVES AND FISHES”

a sermon by

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Galveston, Texas

**July 30, 2006**

*Text: “One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ‘There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what are they among so many?’” (John 6:8-9)*

Having lived outside of Texas for ten of the past twelve years, I can assure you that the rest of the nation has an odd perception of Texas and of Texans. They perceive Texans as a group of people who believe that all-things-Texas are better than anything and everything else; and, they believe that Texans live by the motto “bigger is better.” Bigger houses, bigger cars, taller buildings, better sports franchises, the best college athletes, bigger and better accomplishments – such seems to be the perceived attitudes of Texans. For the record, I said that their perception was odd – not that their perception was wrong.

Texans are not alone in the lifelong quest for the biggest and the best of all than life has to offer. The quest for the best is not uniquely Texan; neither is it uniquely American, or for that matter, modern.

This morning we encounter the Gospel of John as Jesus performs one of the biggest and best miracles. The feeding of thousands has a nice ring to it. But, if we focus only on the immense size of the miracle, we lose the importance of the smallest gift that made it all possible.

There was a large crowd. Many people were fed. But the meal that they ate started from very little. So small was the contribution, that when he pointed to the young boy with five barley loaves and two fish, Andrew asked, “...what are they among so many?”

## *The Gospel of John*

To understand the senseless irony of Andrew’s question, we must understand the Gospel of John and also the events that have already taken place.

The Gospel of John is not like the other Gospel stories found in the New Testament. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke each provide a synopsis of the earthly life and ministry of Jesus. The Gospel of Mark, in its oldest form, is believed to stop with the disciples leaving the tomb after the announcement of Jesus’ resurrection of the dead. The Gospel of Matthew continues through the day of resurrection and includes Jesus’ ascension into heaven. The Gospel of Luke goes on to include the book of Acts, and in so doing tells the story of Jesus and the story of the early church.

In contrast to the three synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John is less of a summary of Jesus' earthly life and work. Instead the Gospel of John is a more powerful story revealing the great *spiritual* life and work of Jesus. For example, the Gospel of John begins with these words:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.”

As the Gospel narrative unfolds, Jesus has already gathered together his disciples. He then proceeded to attend a wedding at Cana, where he turned ordinary water into wine. Jesus has also been to Jerusalem for a Passover feast. While there he found merchants and money changers in the temple. “And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, ‘Take these things away; you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade.’” From Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples continued traveling throughout the Judean region. As they traveled, the disciples baptized many people. In this part of their journey, Jesus encountered and spoke with a Samaritan woman at a well. Because of the words that he spoke to her, many Samaritans are said to have believed. At their invitation Jesus stayed. Seeing his actions, many more people came to believe.

Through Jesus' words and actions, many people have found reason to place their faith in him. But, Jesus' actions have found the attention of many others who – even though they don't *believe* in him – follow after Jesus hoping to see the next great miracle.

This is where we meet the Gospel of John in today's text. Leaving a large crowd, Jesus crosses over the Sea of Galilee to the Sea of Tiberias. Undeterred, “a multitude followed him, because they saw the signs which he did on those who were diseased.”

A large crowd followed Jesus. Add to this the number of people who themselves were traveling to participate in a religious feast. Together these two large crowds were an amazing sight to behold. They were also the source of an enormous problem. There were many people – hungry people – but there was no food for them to eat.

Jesus asked Philip about buying food for the gathering crowd. Philip's answer (“Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.”) does not translate well. This amount would translate into something like eight months of wages earned by a laborer. And even this amount would not have been enough. This was an enormous problem. When it comes to difficulties, maybe bigger isn't always better. A huge crowd is gathering. Many people are hoping to see Jesus do something spectacular. Philip's answer should prepare us for a terrible spectacle.

This is a huge problem. Or, is it?

Is this a real and pressing problem? Or, is this merely an opportunity in disguise?

### *Opportunities in Disguise*

The immediate and pressing problem was the lack of food – and the lack of money to buy food – for the gathering swarm of people. The very presence of this crowd did present a problem. But, it also provided an opportunity.

Many of these people were following after Jesus with the hope of witnessing a miraculous event performed for the benefit of someone else. Their very presence would now provide an opportunity for Jesus to involve them in the miraculous event. This *was* an opportunity in disguise.

Throughout history, a number of people have faced great problems, only to find even greater opportunities.

Booker T. Washington confronted an enormous problem – the lack of educational opportunities for the children of former slaves. Working to build a school in Tuskegee, Alabama, Dr. Washington was confronted by every conceivable obstacle. In his own words: “The work to be done in order to lift these people seemed almost beyond accomplishing. I was only one person, and it seemed to me that the little which I could put forth could go such a short distance toward bringing about results. I wondered if I could accomplish anything, and if it were worthwhile for me to do so.”

As the school opened, Dr. Washington found an opportunity to purchase an abandoned plantation for the reasonable sum of \$500. But, as he said, “Although five hundred dollars was cheap for the land, it was a large sum when one did not have any part of it.”

To purchase the land, he borrowed \$250, but had only one year to raise and to pay the remaining \$250 of the purchase price. In an effort to raise the money a teacher, Miss Olive Davidson (and, as it turned out, the future *Mrs.* Washington) organized a number of fundraising events. These “festivals” as she called them, brought together people “of both races” and “quite a little sum of money was raised.”

Later in his life, Dr. Washington reflected on these festivals and the gifts that were brought by former slaves, “most of whom had spent their best days in slavery. Sometimes they would give five cents, sometimes twenty-five cents. Sometimes the contribution was a quilt, or a quantity of sugarcane. I recall one old coloured woman who was about seventy years of age, who came to see me when we were raising money to pay for the farm. She hobbled into the room where I was, leaning on a cane. She was clad in rags, but they were clean.”

Dr. Washington told the story of this conversation, complete with the woman’s broken, uneducated speech patterns. She had worked and she had saved for her contribution. She handed him a gift of six eggs to put towards the education of the young men and women.

On this gift, Dr. Washington reflected, “Since the work at Tuskegee started, it has been my privilege to receive many gifts for the benefit of the institution, but never any, I think, that touched me so deeply as this one.”

Booker T. Washington faced enormous obstacles. But in this he also found opportunities to unite rich and poor, and also to bring together former slaveholders and former slaves. This month his school, now known as Tuskegee University, celebrated the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its opening. Dr. Washington had wondered if he could accomplish anything, and if it were worthwhile for him to do so. History has proven his efforts to be both effective and worthwhile.

All around us we can see evidence of opportunities disguised, but yet accomplished. In his first Inaugural Address, Ronald Reagan spoke of heroes found in everyday life – ordinary people doing extraordinary work. He spoke of monuments – both great and small – to the work of these American heroes. He pointed to the Washington Monument, and to the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials just behind it. President Reagan then pointed attention across the Potomac River to the countless row upon row of markers at the Arlington National Cemetery.

“Under one such marker lies a young man—Martin Treptow—who left his job in a small town barber shop in 1917 to go to France with the famed Rainbow Division. There, on the western front, he was killed trying to carry a message between battalions under heavy artillery fire. We are told that on his body was found a diary. On the flyleaf under the heading, ‘My Pledge,’ he had written these words: ‘America must win this war. Therefore, I will work, I will save, I will sacrifice, I will endure, I will fight cheerfully and do my utmost, as if the issue of the whole struggle depended on me alone.’”

### *The Challenge for Today*

In the face of great adversity, it’s easy to be overwhelmed by the real and pressing problems.

Martin Treptow, a small-town boy, saw the problem of global chaos and war. But, what difference could he make, even if he gave the full measure of his life? A nameless former slave saw the need for \$500 to build a school for the children of slaves. With so much need, what difference could she make with her gift of six eggs? Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, watched as a crowd of thousands approached. With so much need, what difference could be made by a young boy with his little bit of bread and fish?

In truth, when measured against the visible need, a bit of bread and fish, a handful of eggs, even the life of a young man are by themselves so very little. They are not enough to meet the real and pressing need. However, there is a truth beyond and greater than the visible, real and pressing needs of our day. Even when we cannot see them, the greater opportunities are there.

Consider again the events in the Gospel of John and Andrew’s honest question: “There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what are they among so many?” Seeing the need, Andrew was blind to the opportunity. And, so he asked the wrong question, “what are they among so many?” *Instead*, he should have asked, “what are they *and what can they do when placed in the hands of God?*”

This Sanctuary and all of our church buildings are filled with markers memorializing gifts that met visible, real and pressing needs. Make no mistake about it, without those generous contributions, neither the sanctuary nor our other church buildings – not even this gathered congregation – would be here today.

Too often we look to our own ability to meet a particular need. When looking *only* for the biggest problem that we can solve, we overlook the more important, hidden opportunities.

Our gifts and our sacrifices – our lives, a handful of eggs, a bit of bread and fish – when they remain in our control, they can do nothing more than what we can see. But, these same gifts and sacrifices – our lives, a handful of eggs, a bit of bread and fish – when they are released into the hands of God, there is no limit to their use and benefit.

So today, my challenge for you is this:

This week do not look for problems that you can solve, or for needs that you can meet. Look instead for gifts that you can give and for sacrifices that you can make.

Perhaps you will volunteer once – just once – to spend your Monday afternoon going to pick-up the food for the Salvation Army meal. Or, perhaps you will cook for our Wednesday evening fellowship supper. Maybe you will find yourself helping with childcare for a single church-related event. It's July, going into August, so I must add this: Perhaps you will make a one-time, un-pledged gift to the church's operating budget. This time of year, I assure you that the need is both real and pressing.

The point is this: Search throughout the full measure of your life and of your possessions for a gift that you can give, a sacrifice that you can make. If you give *only* to meet a specific need, your resources – no matter how great they may be – will only go so far. But when you entrust your gift, your sacrifice into the hands of God, your contribution – no matter how small it may appear – will do more than you can imagine.