

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
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John 6: 1-21

When evening came. Verse sixteen. When evening came and the day was over, and they needed to head home. The day was over, and what a day it was. They had crossed over to the other side that morning, and there in that less familiar and less comfortable place with Gentiles, people different from themselves, they saw people flock to the hillside to hear Jesus. We aren't given a detailed description of what Jesus said or did with that crowd of five thousand, but the pattern seems to be that Jesus taught and healed. And the crowd stayed late into the day. And when the disciples had no plan or imagination for how these people would be fed or have the strength to get home, they watched Jesus multiply a boy's lunch to nourish the entire crowd.

It was a good day. My kids often say that when we've had a full and fun day, and everybody is satisfactorily tired and content. It was a good day. I wonder what stories they retold as they walked down the hill to the boats as evening came on. As they started off back across the Sea towards Capernaum, I wonder if they recounted, as our family often does after a good day, what was your favorite part? Was it the crowds' reaction to Jesus' teaching, or was it the look on faces when Jesus multiplied the food, or maybe the conversations happening because the crowd had food to eat and time to stay and talk with one another.

I wonder how long it took for darkness to come on as the disciples started back across the water. How long before their banter and chattiness started to go silent as the wind picked up and the water got rough? I imagine all attention eventually went to rowing or navigating the boat through the dark and wondering how long till they got home. And then, as their jovial banter had gone to serious labor, they saw Jesus coming to them on the water. "When they had rowed about three or four miles," it says, "they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified." How quickly they go from joy to fear. How quickly their response to the unknown goes to terror.

I suppose the problem is that Jesus often works in hard to anticipate ways. I mean, how could they have expected that Jesus was going to meet up with them in the dark amid choppy seas and howling winds. In the same way, how could they have known Jesus would end the day by providing dinner for a massive crowd out of a boy's sac? Or I suppose we could extend this to a great many encounters Jesus has. Like when he reached out and touched the leper, they had been trained to never

touch lepers. They didn't see that coming. Or putting mud on the guy's eyes and telling him to go wash in the pool of Siloam, or when he told the rich young ruler to go sell everything he has to come follow, or when he invited himself to Zacchaeus' house. I mean, in all fairness to the disciples, how Jesus chooses to work in any given situation is often hard to predict, anticipate, or even recognize at first.

In John's gospel account, we are in chapter six, but Jesus has already turned water to wine at a wedding, told an established religious leader he needs to be born again, and healed the son of a Roman officer. He has turned over tables in the temple, healed on the sabbath when the law says you don't work on the sabbath, made friends with a Samaritan woman, and is now feeding a crowd of Gentiles and walking on the waters. In a world where we like to figure out the paradigm, the system, and what to anticipate, Jesus seems to respond differently in different situations. Any attempt to map it cleanly will be a little contrived.

It is notable how often the disciples do not seem to anticipate what Jesus is going to do. Surprise is often the response of the disciples or of the crowds. Sometimes the response is described as awe. At other times, like in our passage, the crowds want to promote him and make him their leader. Still other times, Jesus goes beyond their expectations too much, and they try to contain Jesus, like when Peter rebuked Jesus for saying the Messiah must suffer. Or like when many left Jesus because he was saying things that were too hard. And at still other times, their response is fear. Their response to the unanticipated and the unknown is fear. The word for fear here is not reverence or respect; it is to be in a state of being afraid.

Perhaps it is that desire to know what is coming, to know the paradigm and what to expect that leaves the disciples constantly flatfooted, surprised, out of step at times, and at other times full of fear. They respond to Jesus in fear, because they did not anticipate his coming nor immediately recognize the manner in which he came, walking on water.

And what about us? How well do we anticipate how God wants to move under a particular set of circumstances? And what is our emotional response to the unknown or unanticipated? I mean, if you were there with the crowd that day when the crowds flocked to Jesus and you started to notice the sun getting low in the sky and people having a long way to go, would you have started thinking and dreaming about what Jesus might do? Or would you say, "I'm going home, I don't know about the rest of you." Or would you start doing the calculations in your head and start throwing up your hands, because there is nothing you can do at that point? No one has planned adequately, and there are no protocols in place. Are you the type

prone to jump in with possibility and faith? Or do you pull back and say that's bananas?

And furthermore, how quickly we can go from faith to fear, from amazement at what God has done to throwing up our hands and pulling back. And again, it is not fair. Its understandable that we would do so, because Jesus works in ways and manners that are hard to guess. Yes, they did not anticipate that Jesus was going to feed a crowd. But, if they find themselves in that exact same circumstance again, I imagine they might remember and perhaps anticipate what Jesus is going to do because they had seen it before. They have their mental notes, it was a powerful day burned into their emotional memory, and so when that circumstance arises, they will step up to the plate, full of faith. Fish and bread, they have it down.

Just as they are ready for the next chance to feed a crowd, they end up on stormy seas, and Jesus comes walking on water in the middle of the storm. And their response is terror. Their joy is quickly swallowed in fear, their hope by despair. And into their panic, they hear Jesus words across the water, "It is I; do not be afraid." And the unrecorded response of the disciples, I suspect, was, "Jesus, you have to stop that." "Why can't you just show up like normal people?!"

Now I wonder, while the feeding the crowd scenario is dramatically different from the walking on water in the storm incident, what might they have learned in the first experience that might have helped them anticipate and respond differently to the second? What do you think? What might they have learned in that experience that might have helped them anticipate and respond differently to the walking on water incident? Perhaps that Jesus will not leave them alone in their need. Perhaps that Jesus is not limited in the ways they are, or that they have come to accept. Jesus can multiply resources just as he can walk on water. Jesus works in the moment, just when we start to get nervous and when our ways of handling things stop working. What else would you add? What could they learn from past encounters with Jesus that would have helped them respond at this moment with less terror?

And what about your own journey? Does God always lead and work in the same ways? Or is your own journey with God a little all over the map also? Has God ever led you in ways that you did not see coming? And were you ready and responsive to those moves, to those shifts?

This fall, I am going to be inviting us as a church to have a similar conversation. I have been talking with Session about this, and a letter talking about this will go out this coming week. I use the phrase in this forthcoming letter, "reflecting on the

past, looking towards the future.” At the heart of this conversation is this same question. That is, what can we learn or get in touch with from our journey with Christ in the past that might help us move in step with God moving into the future.

We’ll be reflecting on the past, identifying and learning to tell in detail the stories about when we grew in faith, when God touched us, when we felt cared for and felt the fruit of the Spirit growing in us. What are the moments for Providence Presbyterian when we were in step with Christ and when we felt the Spirit at work? It is an opportunity to get in touch with that positive core, with strengths and the feeling that all things are possible with Christ.

From that place of strength and possibility, we start to dream and hope again. We start to try to see where Christ is at work in new circumstances. Because circumstances change. The world changes around us. So what I am not saying is that the future will look just as it did in the past. We don’t need to have a conversation to come to that conclusion. You can just revert to all past activities, assuming that those same activities and events will lead us into the future. But that would be like the blind man in John 9 coming up to Jesus and the disciples and the disciples being like, may offer you some fish and bread. We don’t know what to do with blindness. But in the past, we had a great meal with fish and bread.

We like paradigms, we like patterns, we like to know what is coming. I understand. I do too. At forty-seven, I would really like to have a stable mapped-out plan for the next twenty years. I want to take confidence in stable circumstances rather than in a faithful Christ. I would rather know how things will go, rather than wait to see how God chooses to show up in the middle of a storm, like Jesus walking to the disciples on the water.

But the hope is that by drawing from the past, we might start to see how we might participate in what God is doing now. What are the works and the opportunities Jesus has for us now?

I think of the poem Denise read by Lucille Clifton. In her poem, water is an obstacle. The endless waves, with no end in sight. The wind. But the poem ends with the phrase of “sailing through this to that.” The waters and the wind could easily turn us back, cause us to rely on what is safe and stable if such options are afforded us. But she invites us not to turn away from the wind and the waves; she invites us not to fear, says that if we don’t pull away in fear, the tide might carry you out / beyond the face of fear. The wind may love your back, you may kiss the wind, the waves may wave at you, and you may “sail through this to that.”

This fall we will be telling stories of how God has worked at Providence in the past, to help us remember those moments of faith and encounter. And reflecting on those moments, we will try to dream and anticipate how God might be leading us into the next chapter, a different chapter.

And what about in our individual journeys? Might a similar principle apply also? What if we reflected on how God has worked with us in the past? What are the moments when you felt closest to God? How did God intervene and help? What about the moments of encountering forgiveness or healing, or when you had to forgive others and move into the future? What are the stories for you?

And if we were to remember and reflect on those stories, would it help us get to the core of the relationship. So that we might catch that thread of faith again. Because God might work differently in this chapter than he did in a past one. God might call us to step out in ways we didn't have to in the past. God might show up in ways and places we didn't anticipate. But perhaps, by remembering the ways God has worked in the past, it might help us walk in faith and openness to how God might work in this chapter.

And we should remember that not only has God worked in the past differently than he might work in the future, but he also works with us a little differently than he does with others. Different in this church than perhaps another church. So rather than resorting to paradigms and straightforward solutions, what we have to do is learn the rhythms of faith again, the rhythms of trust and stepping out, and getting involved with God in the opportunities before us.

That is what the disciples learned in the feeding of the five thousand. Now how else might they apply such a lesson? As evening comes on and they are reflecting on those successes, will they also be ready to see and adapt when the next opportunity arises that looks quite different? Will they be ready to step out in faith and hope? Or will they shrink back because it is new and scary? And what about us?

Feeding the Five Thousand

(Mt 14:13–21; Mk 6:30–44; Lk 9:10–17)

6 After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ² A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³ Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵ When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” ⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷ Philip answered him, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” ⁸ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ⁹ “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” ¹⁰ Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹ Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” ¹³ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

¹⁵ When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Jesus Walks on the Water

(Mt 14:22–33; Mk 6:45–52)

¹⁶ When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, ¹⁷ got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. ¹⁸ The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹ When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. ²⁰ But he said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” ²¹ Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.