

“Are You Hungry?” – May 29, 2016

by Wayne J. Schneider – Credo in unum Deum (I believe in one God)

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St. John 6:1-21

Pastors spend a considerable amount of time deciding on which hymns and choruses to sing each Sunday morning. We attempt to weave hymnody, scripture, liturgy and sermon into a worship experience that brings God glory, and helps us grow spiritually. In the midst of all of this, we even try to pick hymns and choruses that you like!

Another question we ask is, are these the hymns and choruses that God likes? This is, of course, a fundamental but risky question, because there are many answers. The Holy Scriptures note that Jesus attracted people, but he also repelled people too. Jesus' ministry was based on a stronger foundation than "*Do these crowds like me and what I say?*"

Today's Gospel lesson brings us to a large group that kept following Jesus. Isn't this one method we use to evaluate success and popularity? Who argues with metrics? Or with Numbers? We live in a bottom-line society. Jesus has made it onto the "A" list.

St. John explains the reason the crowd is following Jesus: "A large crowd was following Jesus because they had seen the miraculous signs he had done among the sick." If you heal the hurting, you are going to attract a crowd. After all, if you have your health, you have everything, right? When you are a 'need-meeter', you'll have a following.

Strangely, while we might think Jesus would continue his healing ministry, he does not. Verse 3 tells us, "Jesus went up a mountain and sat there with his disciples." Jesus may have been from Nazareth, but he knew a thing or two. Without boundaries burnout happens all too often.

But even 'the best-laid plans of mice and men' Those who say that Jesus didn't have a funny-bone haven't read the Holy Scriptures correctly. Jesus, smiling to himself as he sees the crowd approaching, says to Phillip, "*Say, how much would the caterers charge to put on a spread for all these people?*"

Phil whips out his I-phone and comes up with an estimate of around six month's salary, but this would only provide a snack, not a six-course supper! Another disciple finds a child who has a snack-in-a-sack. Jesus asks everyone to take a seat. Jesus says a blessing over the fishnuggets and pita bread and everyone eats. Afterward everyone remarks that they are so stuffed it feels as if they had eaten an eight-course meal! Jesus is the poster-child for compassion; he who meets people's needs.

I know you've heard THAT sermon many times. It's one of the various reasons we come to worship. But this isn't the end of today's story. When everyone was fed and the leftovers collected, the people said, "This is truly the prophet who is coming into the world." Perhaps Jesus finds some fulfillment by such a response. Finally, some may be getting the point. After being rejected and now being seen for who you are, it must be gratifying.

Not so much. Jesus does not accept their approval. Verse 15 again, "Jesus understood that they were about to come and force him to be their king, so he took refuge again, alone on a mountain."

Now isn't that odd? Here, when people accept Jesus, he withdraws from the crowd and wants to be alone. What's going on here? Why leave when he is about to be crowned king? What more could Jesus want? The crowd desires bread and Jesus provides. They pronounce him king what more could they do?

Flash back to the start of Jesus' ministry, the 40-days in the desert and its testing. Satan dialogs with Jesus and offers him both heaven and earth. As part of this testing, Satan asks Jesus to turn stone into bread. Jesus '*just says no.*' Jesus chooses early on that he would not settle for being a 'need-meeter' (as good as that is), when he is called to be the Messiah. He would not accept being good when God called him to be the best.

With his refusal to be their king on their terms, they demand another 'free meal' (people never change). Instead, they receive the "Bread of life" sermon, where Jesus shows them that it is he, the bread of heaven (v. 60) they need. At that point, a lot of those who were following him ceased to do so, because this teaching was 'difficult.'

Jesus turns down what the crowd wants because what they desire is what the world system stands for: "*What will you do for us? What do I get out of it?*" I believe that many of us come to worship for assistance to get through the week, to find inner peace, to gain supportive guidance for difficult decisions we all face. And all of this is just fine.

Like our Gospel lesson, it first appears to be about us, but turns out to be a story about Jesus. We come to worship self-focused and learn that it is really about God. When will Wayne learn? Following Jesus is not another means of helping us get what we want. Rather, it is the way God gets what God wants. Jesus is not yet another therapeutic tool to get what we wish for. The gospel is pretty clear about the fact that we don't know what we want before or sometimes even after we meet Jesus.

William Sloan Coffin said, "*I don't know how you attracted people to the gospel by appealing to their essentially selfish needs. We must offer them instead the unselfish gospel of Jesus.*"

St. John's Gospel calls miracles 'signs' because they point beyond the event to a deeper meaning. Blessed bread given to people is a symbol of God's presence in Jesus. Our God is larger than our hunger. Alleluia. Amen.