

Year B, Proper 12 (July 24-30 inclusive)

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John 6:1-21

### **Pulling Him Aboard in a Raging Storm!**

When I put myself into the mindset of the people Jesus has round him and read the phrase “After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberius,” a shudder runs down my back. Any reference to “Tiberius” means Rome, crushing power, crosses by the hundreds with corpses on them and fear; mind-numbing fear. That’s the way Rome wanted it. They were brutal, calloused, and calculating in their plan to maintain dominance of the world. Even little lake Galilee in far away Palestine had been renamed “The Sea of Tiberius” to make sure the unruly Jews knew who was in charge.

For those who understand political reality, the next scene continues the menacing movement that will culminate in Jerusalem. “A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick.” Large crowds were a danger. Rome hated large crowds and followed them as a national security threat. Rome was right. This crowd was following Jesus thinking that his power over illness could be used to battle Rome. For these people the signs pointed to his power—a power they needed to fight Rome. It would be another David against Goliath and they saw the possibility of recruiting their David.

When they came ashore “Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples.” He had no need to garner favor with this crowd. They sat down and the crowd trudged up the mountain toward them. At that moment the text tells us it is near Passover, the festival of the Jews. Passover celebrates the way they believed God delivered the Jews from the brutal reign of their Egyptian dominators. Now with Rome as their dominator these people again have rebellion on their minds. They want to recruit Jesus.

“When Jesus 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.’” The people coming toward him want violence and Jesus wants to give them bread. Is this a prophetic fast-forward to where Jesus will give the bread of his broken body to reveal the depth of human wrath?

Also notice his question is where to buy bread, not how do we pay for it. The gospel writer says it is a test question. Jesus knew what he was going to do but he wanted to hear Philip’s response. He knew it’s the way we humans think. Philip says, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.”

There is not enough! Isn’t this the world’s way of thinking? We will have to either give each a morsel or leave some out. Let’s establish a protocol for deciding who gets food and who

doesn't. We do this very cleverly and make it so obscure that we can't see what we are doing but the ones left out can.

"One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?'"

We received a mailing from Doctors without Borders. They reminded us how even a small amount saves the lives of many desperate people. But what can we do? We don't have a lot of money. We read their material and decided to give more than we expected. We became the little boy with five barley loaves and two fish.

"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." They're having a picnic, all five thousand of them, and the grass is green, soft, and abundant. We can feel its coolness on our feet.

"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." And there was enough! They had as much as they wanted and still there was more. Would that happen if we forgot about "us and them" and instead shared all that grows on this earth as though there were no boundaries? Sharing bread and fish might go a long way toward reducing the world's tensions.

If this makes you think of communion, you're on the right track. That, too, is a feast where there is always enough with much more to spare. It is enough because love multiplies as it is shared. Our deepest desire is satisfied when we let love in.

"When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.'" The love Jesus has just shared is precious and even the fragments that remain are valuable.

"So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets." Jesus has turned the boy's lunch, shared so generously, into food for all.

The story does not end here. "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.'" They are thinking of a warrior prophet who will lead them in battle. They misread the sign making it a pointer toward violence. The drums of war start beating. They have visions of drafting Jesus. They could use someone with Jesus' power to counter the power of "Tiberius." The crowd, who a moment before sat on grass and feasted, becomes an unorganized army with dreams of threatening Rome. The ominous feeling with which the story began, now returns.

“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.” The large crowd want him to be their warrior king; he will have no part of it and removes himself from their presence.

What happens next feels strange to us. “When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the Sea to Capernaum.” Why did they leave Jesus stranded? Were they angry with him for refusing to become king and lead his people out of bondage? Were they ashamed of him and came at dark so that no one would see them? Were they making a break from him; cutting themselves off because they are disillusioned?

“The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. 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.” He must be really angry with them; so angry he will probably send them all to the bottom of the lake. They were projecting their feelings onto Jesus.

“But he said to them, ‘It is I; do not be afraid.’” Scholars tell us a better translation would be “I Am, do not be afraid.” “I AM” is the ancient name by which God refers to himself. Jesus explicitly connects himself with the great “I AM” of the Hebrew Bible. In Jesus’ actions of withdrawing from the crowd we learn something about the great “I AM.” The Creator is neither vindictive nor retaliatory. We even see this in the way he forgave the disciples for leaving him. We will see it again when he returns after the resurrection.

As always, Jesus’ powerful watchword is “do not be afraid.” It’s a different word than all empires that control through fear. It is a word very different from all religious words that threaten God’s wrath. Jesus will have no part of threatening people.

As soon as he said, “It is I. Do not be afraid,” they took him into the boat. “Immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.” They were home. Though the disciples had left Jesus behind, they now welcomed him back with gratitude and relief. For a moment they know that Jesus is Lord! Not fear, not Rome, not the strong men who rule the world. Jesus is Lord!

In the stormy and turbulent waters of our time I want us to pull Jesus into our fragile boat. When we pull him aboard our fears are calmed, our hope renewed, and our faith deepened. Thanks be to God. Amen.