



**Food for Life Campaign  
Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance  
Sermon Competition 2010-2011  
[www.e-alliance.ch](http://www.e-alliance.ch)**

Jesus and Food

John 6:1-15 (New International Version)

- 1 Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberius),
- 2 and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick.
- 3 Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples.
- 4 The Jewish Passover Festival was near.
- 5 When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?”
- 6 He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.
- 7 Philip answered him, “It would take more than half a year’s wages [a] to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!”
- 8 Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up,
- 9 “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?”
- 10 Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there).
- 11 Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.
- 12 When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.”
- 13 So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.
- 14 After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, “Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.”
- 15 Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

In John Chapter 6, the narrator tells us that Jesus had gone to Tiberius and a great multitude followed him. Jesus’ sat with his disciples and the story tells us that it was close to the Passover, the commemoration of one of the fundamental pillars of the people of Israel: liberation from slavery in Egypt. Verse four, chapter six is telling us a liberating act will take place among the crowd.

Jesus turned his gaze to the crowd, surely with a look of compassion typical of the teacher and asked one of his disciples. “Where can we buy bread for these people to eat?,” (a question that is also for us). The surprised disciple can only resort to mathematical and statistical calculations in order to say there aren’t enough resources to feed a multitude (it would appear that Philip could be a presidential advisor or a member of a multi lateral economic body in our time).

Suddenly one of the disciples, Andrew, appears with an idea that seems promising, but also he draws on the need to make calculations to confirm there is not enough bread to feed the crowd. Andrew presents a child, possibly a boy, who brings five loaves of barely and two small fish. Here we begin to witness the liberating act that John announced when he mentioned the proximity of the

Passover.

Five loaves of barley. Loaves of barley were the most common food in ancient times until Romans replaced them with wheat bread that was used by the richest social sectors while the poor continued to eat barley loaves. The poor ate barley loaves, the rich ate wheat loaves. The grains were milled between two millstones, a task that nearly always fell to women. The bread was kneaded in a trough, an artifact that was recognized in the book of Exodus, and later they added yeast so the bread would rise, except when it was bread for the Passover<sup>1</sup>.

John's specific reference to wheat bread is aimed at underscoring that it is poor people who are part of the multitude that followed Jesus, including farmers and fishermen, in particular given that Tiberius was located on the shores of the sea of Galilee, also called the Lake of Tiberius.

Fish was also an essential food in Palestine, in particular in coastal cities. We can see in several passages in the Gospels (Matthew 4:18, Matthew 7:10, Luke 5:5, Luke 24:42, John 21:10) how people considered fish to be essential to their diet. And it wasn't just part of the essential diet in Palestine, but fish itself was an important element of work and the economy. Jesus gathered his first disciples from among this group, in order to make them fishers of humanity.

Returning to the story, we may ask ourselves if those five barley loaves and the two fish would be the only thing that the child and his family would eat that day. We don't know this for certain, however, there is something significant in this gesture. Jesus builds his kingdom from the weakest, from those who may seem insignificant. In the face of a crowd, a child could seem fragile, could go unnoticed. Five loaves and two fish were also insignificant in the face of a hungry multitude.

However, before the gaze of Jesus it was enough. Before his eyes the child and what he carried in his hands was enough to demonstrate the kindness, compassion and mercy of God, the richness of his Kingdom that is based not on the number of possessions, not on the accumulation of goods but on a willingness to share what you have with joy and simplicity of heart, even if it does not seem like much.

Here it is important to emphasize another aspect and that is the gratitude with which Jesus takes the food and asks his disciples to share it. Another of the fundamental aspects of the Kingdom of God is gratitude. The Lord invites us to be grateful every day for His immeasurable kindness. Gratitude leads us to recognize what we have or enjoy every day as a gift of God. A gift we receive to share with those who surround us, in particular with those who have the greatest needs or are the most vulnerable, like the multitude that listened attentively and closely watched the boy who shared his bread and Jesus giving thanks for it. To share is a gift of God, as is gratitude.

*“The gift of sharing. The capacity to share what has been given to us should be considered in and of itself a special gift of God. This does not seem to come “naturally” to human beings. The tendency to think of ourselves first, seems almost to be a survival instinct. The experience of Pentecost, in which the Holy Spirit came down upon the followers of Jesus, without a doubt greatly motivated for the fledgling Church to think of the community before the individual. (...)”<sup>2</sup>*

We later see how the bread and fish is multiplied in the hand of Jesus after the action of thanksgiving. In the hand of the Church, with a heart full of thanksgiving, bread should also

---

<sup>1</sup> DUCROT, Victor Ego, " Eat and drink in the times of Jesus" Middle East and Africa correspondent, August 2000

<sup>2</sup> Eleventh Lutheran World Federation Assembly, study material. First day, the granting of grace. Give us today our daily Bread. Lutheran World Federation, A Communion of Churches – Lutheran Church of Wurttemberg, p. 15, Office for communication services. Geneva, Switzerland, 2010

multiply itself to satisfy those who are excluded. In each context where it finds itself, the Church must be a living witness to the action of Jesus, who with gratitude and by recognizing those who go unnoticed by contemporary society, was able to ensure that people had access to food.

Here another liberating and hope filled message is revealed. Not only was there enough bread and fish for everyone, but just like when the manna rained down from heaven for the people of Israel, and everyone gathered enough, the people who followed Jesus had enough to eat and not only were they satisfied but there were 12 baskets of food left over!

The initial calculations of the disciples who said that the bread was not enough were wrong. What became reality in the hands of Jesus was that there was enough bread for everyone who was there, for every man, woman and child and there was also food left over. This is how Jesus shows us that God's grace is abundant and that it is for all of humanity, even the entire creation.

*“Similar convictions were expressed in the Old Testament when the Psalm describes “every living thing” having its needs satisfied by the merciful hand of God. (Psalm 145: 16). Does it not follow from here then, that according to these Biblical testimonies, all creation can claim food as a right granted by God?”<sup>3</sup>*

There is an evident contrast between what Jesus did and the attitude and responses of our governors and the multi-lateral bodies when humanities' need for food is brought before them. Their response is to say that there is not enough, that it is not possible to feed all human beings, that to feed the multitude would overwhelm the capacity of the States and the market system would collapse. However, we frequently find that there is enough money for weapons and advanced security systems. What are our governments investing resources in?

Unlike some leaders, Jesus gives food out of compassion, not to seek political support or votes for upcoming elections. It is sad to see candidates for president, governors or other government positions, sharing food with the crowds only to be elected without them really caring about what happens to people after the elections. Jesus turned down political power, when the multitude wanted him to be King he went alone to the mountain. This was not his kingdom.

What a difference with our Lord Jesus, for whom life is paramount, the possibility that people are not sick or hungry, but are fully satisfied. As a Church, are we motivated by the same interests that motivated Jesus?

We also see in John's Gospel an interest in food sovereignty, an emphasis on the importance of national production and even gender equity in the production and consumption of food. Jesus prioritizes the bread and fish over other possible products that were commercialized by the Roman Empire in Palestine. Jesus was presenting a scandalous alternative: people should not depend on foreign production the free trade of the empire for food. He showed us that communities can produce their own food and conserve their means of production.

The bread and fish are products elaborated and processed both by men and women who tend to eat the fruit of their labor, food to which they were accustomed. They were adequate, adapted and accessible for the population that consumed them. Apparently the Committee of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was aware of this passage when the elaborated their General Observation No 12

---

<sup>3</sup> Eleventh Lutheran World Federation Assembly, study material, Second Day. Bread for All, Gives us today our daily Bread. Lutheran World Federation, A Communion of Churches – Lutheran Church of Wurttemberg, p. 4, Office for communication services. Geneva, Switzerland, 2010

about the right to food.

At the same time, the bread and the fish that were multiplied were shared by men and by women, as well as by children and young people. All people, regardless of their gender or age, were participants in the grace of God.

In the face of an ineffable demonstration of the mercy and compassion of God, and the call to share what we have with thanksgiving, in particular with those and from those who are the most vulnerable and excluded from the systems that dominate the current world. Jesus invites us, just as in those times along side the Sea of Galilee, today as a Church we put everything we have in the hand of Jesus, so that he helps us distribute it, and with a grateful heart we will participate in the multiplication of the grace of God.

*Eternal Father, give us a generous heart and teach us the miracle of sharing like this child in Galilee. Lord Jesus Christ, help us so that our trust is placed only in you, and not in the systems of power or wealth that exclude: Holy Spirit, move us to actively participate as a Church so that all people in the world have their daily bread. Amen.*

Fabián Wilches  
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Colombia  
Bogota D.C., Colombia  
March 2011