

MISSING THE POINT

Ephesians 4:1-16

John 6:24-35

Have you ever tried to keep a secret? Of course you have. Maybe it was a secret about your personal life, perhaps a secret about a friend or maybe it was a secret about your work. We have all kept secrets, sometimes as a favor, sometimes out of obligation or perhaps as a job responsibility.

I think it's rather funny actually that, after all these years, the formulas for making Coca-Cola and Kentucky Fried Chicken are still secrets. However, how to make a hydrogen bomb is available on the Internet.

People have always had secrets--sometimes for good reasons. I've often wondered why it was that Jesus often told people after he had done something spectacular, like healing them of a disease, "Don't tell anybody."

One reason I suspect Jesus did that is that he didn't want people coming to him for the wrong reasons.

Consider our lesson for today. In the preceding story from last week, Jesus has just fed five thousand men and an unknown number of women and children with five small barley loaves and two small fish. I believe that would qualify as quite a spectacular miracle. And what was the result?

Really, it was predictable. People started coming to him in droves. For what? For more bread or for more fish? Perhaps, but I suspect it was for much more than a free meal. John tells us that after this miraculous event the people began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." And then we read, "Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself."

They missed the point...not understanding either "why" or "what" about Jesus.

Then, a few verses later, in our lesson for today, we find Jesus and the disciples withdrawing to their boat, leaving the crowd behind, and journeying to the other side of the lake. And what happened? The crowd follows them there. And why wouldn't they? You've seen images of that part of the world on television.

It's not an easy place to live--even in peace time. Anybody who could give them food and drink without effort was certainly going to be at the top of their list. And if this was the political leader who would throw out the hated Romans, I'm sure they would have done almost anything to put Him in power.

You and I really can't relate to their daily struggle for security. The lack of security that marked their everyday existence is unimaginable to people who live in the land of supermarkets, fast food establishments, modern refrigeration and reasonably stable governments.

A few years ago, Belgium went 589 days without an installed government. More than a year and a half! Sure, there were some ramifications for the population. Well, I guess there were. Honestly, I don't think the average Belgian noticed much difference, other than in the news.

That is stability...something FAR from the world of Jesus' time.

Then along comes this guy who can produce massive amounts of food at will. Someone who can heal incurable illnesses. Someone who seems to be the kind of king who would rid their world of the hated oppressors. Who wouldn't follow him?

But Jesus didn't come to provide food for the body or a new political regime. He came to provide the eternal spiritual food that flows from a relationship with God. **The people who sought him that day were missing the real miracle he came to bring.**

Not too long ago, an extensive survey was conducted by a leading polling agency. Questionnaires were distributed to people of various ages and occupations. The key question was this: What are you looking for most in life? When the results were compiled, the analysts were surprised.

Although there was some minor variation from generation to generation, X'ers, Y'ers, Millennials, Baby-Boomers and from singles and marrieds, there was a surprising consistency across the survey responses.

The surveyors had expected material goals to top the list, but the top three things that people wanted in life were love, joy, and peace.
Love, Joy, Peace.

Oh sure, there were those who listed money or cars or fancy houses, big yachts, that sort of thing. But by an overwhelming majority, those three responses showed up on top; love, joy, peace.

Our true needs can't be satisfied by material goods.

Jesus realized that the people were coming to him for the wrong reasons. He said, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill." (v.26)

The people had just experienced an extraordinary miracle. But they missed the point of it all. They treated Jesus' generous miracle like a circus sideshow. "Do it again! Do it bigger and better this time!" The food, however, was just a sign. What Jesus was trying to communicate to them was the love that motivated this miracle. He was trying to say to them that he has so much more to offer them than just temporary security.

God's abundance goes far beyond just providing for our daily needs. In Isaiah 55, God reassured His people, "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare . . . Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near." (Isaiah 55: 1-2, 6)

But the people didn't get it; Jesus is not offering the people food. He is offering himself. He is offering all the power and promises of God in the flesh.

Our deepest need is not for the things God provides; our deepest need is for God. **The people missed the point. They misunderstood his miracles and they also misunderstood Jesus' message.** Listen to what they ask Jesus: "**What must we do to do the works God requires?**"

They're saying, "Eternal life sounds good to us. What's the rest of the deal? What good works can we do, how many times a week must we pray, exactly how much should we give to the temple offering, how often must we fast, in order to fill God's quota?"

These people are not spiritual ne'r-do-wells. To be a righteous Jew required a level of devotion and sacrifice foreign to most of us.

They spent time in prayer and worship, they gave sacrificially of their possessions. Their commitment would put us to shame. They wanted salvation. They just wanted be able to buy it off the supermarket shelves. They viewed religion as a commodity to be obtained--not a life to be lived.

A cartoon in *Leadership* magazine shows a man shaking his pastor's hand at the end of the service. The man is remarking to the perplexed pastor, "I realize salvation is free . . . but what is the suggested donation?"

There is no suggested donation. Salvation is not earned. It is received. To receive Jesus, to believe in him as our Lord and Savior, is to become part of his kingdom here and now.

This is an important point: It's not about what we need to do, but about what Jesus has already done.

Some time ago, author Robert Fulghum tells of finding this sad message at a graduate school in Berkeley, California.

God, I have a problem.

I'm just a man and I'm feeling so alone.

God, I know you have no name, but I need to call you something.

God, I know you are not a man like me, but I need to think of you that way.

God, I know you are everywhere, but I need to talk to you somewhere.

God, I know you are eternal, but I need you now.

God, forgive my limitations, and help me. Amen.

Imagine the pain that motivated an anonymous young author to write this desperate prayer. "God, I know you have no name, but I need to call you something. God, I know you are not a man like me, but I need to think of you that way." What hope can we offer to him?

Here it is in black in white: in Jesus, God has a name. In Jesus, God became man. In Jesus, God offered all of God's Self to us. Yes, Jesus can provide for our physical needs without breaking a sweat. But that's not the real miracle. The real miracle is that he has provided a way for our salvation, a way that cost him everything but costs us nothing.

We have only to believe and receive. And Jesus promises that the one who does believe him and receive him will experience the fullness of God in this life and forever.

The only requirement of Christian faith is to believe in Jesus as your Savior and Lord. When that happens, a real miracle occurs--the miracle of a changed life.

We deceive ourselves if we think our deepest needs are only physical. Only fools believe that a full belly or a full bank account makes for an abundant life. God knew our deepest need before He even created us. And before we ever asked for salvation, God planned a way to give it to us. Romans 5: 8 tell us, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." He is the bread of life, and he gives himself freely to all who hunger. Receive Jesus today and you will have eternal life.