

## Following Jesus: Part I

*"A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick." (John 6:2)*



Why are you following Jesus? This is not an idle question. We call ourselves Christians. We talk the talk and do our best to walk the walk. Most of us have been grounded in the beliefs, ethics and practices of Christianity our entire lives. There is no doubt that as we follow the tenets of our religion, we make our world a better place, one kindness at a time.

But if we peel back the rich collection of teachings of our faith, if we look beyond the marvelous traditions of the various denominations, we arrive at what C.S. Lewis and the great English divine Richard Baxter called "mere Christianity." At the heart of it all, being a Christian merely means following Jesus. Following Jesus also happens to be the central theme of the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, which we begin to read today. Let's see what it has to say about being a mere Christian.

The chapter opens with a large crowd following Jesus around the Sea of Galilee. While the other Gospels talk about the crowd in their accounts of the feeding of the five thousand, only John explicitly says why they were following Jesus: *"Because they saw the signs he was doing for the sick." (John 6:2)*

St. Augustine, thinking about the scriptures, defines a sign as *"a thing, which besides the impression it conveys to the senses, also has the effect of making something else come to mind." (On Teaching Christianity, II.1.1)*. Jesus' healing miracles were certainly impressive on their own. But the crowd saw something that went beyond the obvious event of being made well. Something they wanted so much that they dropped what they were doing to follow Jesus on the long walk around the lake.

Now John doesn't tell us what the crowd saw in Jesus' signs. In fact, none of the Gospels explicitly say why the crowd was trailing after him. Perhaps the people themselves couldn't put their finger on it. They just felt...something. This Jesus of Nazareth, this healer, held out the promise of fulfilling some deeper need. A longing perhaps. Maybe a brokenness that needed to be made whole. Some hunger.

Jesus, though, does understand the crowd's wants. He asks Phillip: *"Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" (John 6:5)* Of course, the question is valid on a literal level, which is the only one that Philip grasps. But Jesus is also asking the question at a deeper level, the level of what the crowd senses in Jesus' signs. Mark's account puts it this way: *"He had compassion for them, because they were like a sheep without a shepherd." (Mark 6:34)*

The interplay between the crowd's physical and spiritual hunger becomes a source of tension later in the chapter, but for now, the Gospel moves through the familiar story of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. The well known prophet Elisha, the inheritor of Elijah's mantle, fed one hundred with twenty barley loaves. With just five loaves, Jesus feeds five thousand *"as much as they wanted." (John 6:11)* The

contrast between Elisha's amazing feat and Jesus' incomprehensibly lavish miracle would not have been lost on either the crowd or the Jews in John's audience. *"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.'"* (John 6:14)

John's account of that day also provides several signs not found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. In the synoptic versions, Jesus takes the bread and offers the customary Jewish meal blessing, *eulogeó* in Greek. In John, Jesus gives thanks - he blesses God, not the food. The Greek word is *eucharisteó*, the same word used to describe Jesus' act of giving thanks at the Last Supper. This sense of the five thousand partaking in a thanksgiving meal is emphasized a few verses after the ending point of today's passage: *"Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks."* (John 6:23) John also situates the feeding of the five thousand near the Passover, the time associated with the Last Supper in the other Gospels.

We tend to think of our Eucharist as a remembrance of what Jesus did with his disciples in the upper room at the Last Supper. So it is. And, it is much more. The signs in John's miraculous and lavish thanksgiving meal point to the good news that the Eucharist is also about God's gift of abundant life in Christ.

Jesus *"told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.'"* (John 6:12). Those fragments were meant for us. When we line up for communion in a bit, we join that crowd on the Galilean hillside, along with countless others in a great Eucharistic Feast where all are nourished in abundance. As Jesus gives thanks to the Father, our quiet little communion line becomes a noisy, joy-filled parish hall full of God's people enjoying an all you can eat celebration.

At this point, the Gospel takes a turn. The crowd, caught up in the immensity of the physical miracle, and it's proximity to Passover, the great feast of liberation, want to take Jesus *"by force to make him king."* (John 6:15) The people try to force upon Jesus' signs their own interpretation of an earthly kind of salvation - a powerful king who will restore the Jewish nation. At bible study last Tuesday, someone noted that *"God made us in his image, and we returned the favor."* Jesus will have none of it, and withdraws up the mountain by himself.

But he does not give up. That night, Jesus comes to the disciples, walking across the rough seas in the middle of the lake. There, in the frightening dark and deep, he offers another sign. In words that echo God's own identity as Yahweh, he tells them *"It is I; do not be afraid."* (John 6:20) And they immediately find themselves in the safe harbor of their intended destination.

Who is this man? Why are we following him? Or perhaps, as we try to blindly navigate our own stormy seas...why is he following us?

Next Sunday, we'll explore the next verses of chapter six, where Jesus lays bare the tension between our physical and spiritual hunger. And we will arrive at Jesus' answer to the question we started with: Why should we follow him? Stay tuned!