

In the 70's there was a loud conversation about Jesus as a revolutionary. Liberation Theology, which was very popular in South America, averred that liberation from political oppression was the most important kind of liberation possible. Since Jesus taught about justice and the value of persons, pieces of Liberation Theology resonated throughout the Christian community. However the movement's commitment to Marxism, as an economic philosophy, made it controversial and vulnerable. Here, in Mark 6, the crowd, coming out to see Jesus, had the same hopes and aspirations. Jesus teaches us four things about His revolution in the story of the feeding of the five thousand men. First, this was a political rally not a social event. Second, the revolution Jesus leads is counter-intuitive. Third, it was a revolution led by the inadequate. Fourth, its foundation is a self-sacrificing love.

### **A Political Rally not a Social Event**

Often we imagine this as a peaceful and bucolic scene. Yet, John reminds us that it had all the makings of a political gathering ready to erupt in political revolution. Consider John's description of the crowd's motive in 6:15, "They came out to Jesus in order to make Him king by force." They came to force Jesus to be their new revolutionary leader. They had enough of Herod and Rome and they wanted to run both out of town and they were not going to take "No" for an answer. Liberation and revolution were on their minds. Second, the phrase "sheep without a shepherd," in v.34, is a direct quotation from Moses in Num. 27 where Moses, at the end of his life, asked God to give Israel a new political and military leader to succeed him. God answered that prayer by appointing Joshua to be Israel's next military commander and political leader. Moses was not asking God to provide them with a pastor or a priest in a religious sense. He was asking for a military commander. "sheep without a shepherd," means an *army without a commander* or a *nation without a political leader*. The context is political. Third, when v. 44 says that there were 5,000 men who ate the loaves, most commentaries suggest that Mark was listing the heads of families and that there could have been as many as seven or eight thousand people present. That is possible. However, given the political motives of the crowd, perhaps Mark means us to take him somewhat literally. Freedom fighters often live in the country and hillsides. Yes, others came out from the towns nearby. However, Mark's focus could be on a large group of disaffected men (Zealots), who after hearing Jesus' powers, decided to make Jesus their next king. So, this is a political event. It's about beginning a revolution, with a large network of men coming to Jesus to demand that He be their next revolutionary leader.

### **A Counter-Intuitive Revolution**

Now these men were right about Jesus - He is a king and He is a revolutionary, although not in the way anyone expected. Revolutionaries hand out weapons and begin boot camp and gorilla warfare training. Jesus gives out His word and bread.<sup>1</sup> He provides bread distribution training. Jesus publicly rejected the Zealot model of liberation. When Mark says that Jesus had "compassion on the crowd," their physical hunger was not the source of that compassion. Their political motivations and momentary hunger were *opportunities* for Jesus to make a point. There was no real crisis for food! The disciples were correct to say that the crowd could have been easily dismissed to get food. It was simply getting late. Food was accessible. Jesus' request to feed the crowd confused them because there was no real urgency. Yet, there was a real crisis. The real crisis was a famine of hearing the word of God! So Jesus teaches the crowd and gives them bread. His miracle was highly symbolic. To our culture, which spends over a billion dollars a year on Disney Princess paraphernalia, bread is an afterthought. But, in the first century, for most, bread meant life! By teaching and feeding the crowd Jesus was saying, "Yes, I am a revolutionary leader but while other revolutionaries deal in death, I give out life. And, when Jesus gave out the Word and the bread He was bringing life in two ways: First, in v. 34, He gives His word, which is the best bread and the ultimate source of life. "He began to teach them many things." Elsewhere He said, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the Father." So, Jesus gives them the bread of His word. They have a hunger that physical bread cannot satisfy. Without this bread, their

---

<sup>1</sup>See T. Keller's Lessons on Mark, for a fuller treatment of this idea. Redeemer Presbyterian Church, NY.

revolutions would default to the same political power struggles that most every other political revolution produces. Political revolution almost always amounts to rearranging the characters. Jesus is not interested in liberating the oppressed so that they can merely take the place of the rulers they now despise. First, they have to be taught by Jesus before they can ever lead in a good revolution. There are hungers that political revolution cannot ever satisfy. Moreover, there is a significant danger by those who established political power without being taught by Jesus. Most are not ready for political power. I am not suggesting that Jesus is against political transformation. But when political change is not informed by the teachings of Jesus, it will never get its priorities right. Be careful of putting your hopes in anyone who wants political power but who has yet to be taught well by Jesus, especially those who do not know about how Jesus uses authority or how He combines exclusive claims of authority with an inclusive love, or the value He put on all people regardless of race, gender, wealth and social status. Notice that the prerequisite to a Christian revolution is to have sat at Jesus feet and learned from Him. Jesus' response to the call for revolution was to teach or feed the crowd His word.

Jesus gave them His word and then He gave them *bread*. Jesus demonstrated that His revolution was also about *acts* of love and mercy. He fed 5,000 hungry men and perhaps more. Yet, healing sick people, cleansing lepers, raising up children or feeding some slightly hungry people are not the kind of miracles revolutionaries desire. They are way too domestic. If Jesus had unlimited or divine power why not do something really impressive? Why not do Super Heroes miracles? Why not shoot Himself up in the sky and do a few aerial somersaults? That would really get people excited. Why didn't Jesus knead dirt and spittle in His hand and instead of restoring sight to a blind man, morph it into a ball of fire, throw it at Mount Hermon and incinerate it to oblivion? Those would be displays of power. However, *Jesus is not about displaying raw power*. His miracles are always redemptive. You would never see Jesus preening around some stage, blowing on people and claiming a miracle because they pass out and fall to the ground. That works for those seeking a spectacle but not those seeking the real Jesus. We often think of miracles as the suspension of the natural order. A Magician in India claims a miracle by mesmerizing Cobras, with his music. But snakes are deaf; they don't have ears; also their poison is always extracted before the performance. They claim to make a rope rise straight up in the air and they prove the miracle by walking up the rope. Yet, if you look carefully they only perform the "miracle" when they are performing on a platform, with an assistant underneath pushing a steel rod up through the center of the rope. When we think of miracles, we think of the suspension of the natural order. However, Jesus' miracles are the only pure natural things in a world that has become unnatural and wounded.<sup>2</sup> God did not make the world the way it has become. God created a world with no hunger, disease, poverty, injustice, leprosy, blindness and death. Thus, these things are unnatural! Jesus' miracles are not the suspensions of the natural order; instead, they are *restorations* of the natural order. They briefly return us to the world as it was before sin and corruption entered it, before there was disease and death. They also point us forward to a time when Jesus will heal this world of all its diseases in the new heavens and the new earth. Someday we will be eating bread in the new heavens and new earth without death, disease, suffering, injustice, blindness and hunger. And that future guarantee is bread that we can taste and eat of now. The crowd was hungry, but Jesus' miracle symbolized that He has come to satisfy a deeper hunger for a life in a world that has become distorted and unnatural because of sin. Jesus' kingdom is permanent, eternal, life giving and not just the replacement of one oppressor for another.

Look, the humanist and naturalist also want to rid the world of disease, poverty, injustice and death. Yet they argue that we are here by accidental or completely random and natural causes: an explosion of energy and a random meeting of amino acids. They say that it is natural for the strong to eat the weak, for the survival of the fittest to violently prevail over the less able. They say that it is natural for nature to be "red in tooth and claw."<sup>3</sup> In her book *A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard thought this, so she retreated to nature to

---

<sup>2</sup>I think this was first said by Jürgens Moltmann.

<sup>3</sup>Dillard, Annie *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* p. 7-8, "He was a very small frog with wide, dull eyes. And just as I looked at him, he slowly crumpled and began to sag. The spirit vanished from him as if snuffed. His skin emptied and dropped; his very skull seemed to collapse and settle like a kicked tent. He was shrinking before my eyes like a deflating football. I watched the taunt, glistening skin of his shoulders ruck, and rumple, and fall. Soon, part to his skin, formless as a pricked balloon, lay in floating folds like bright scum on

discover the wonderful purity of nature. There she saw a water beetle trap a baby frog, wrap its legs around it, bite it and inject toxic enzymes into its body. She describes how the frog's body crumpled and sagged, its skull collapsed like a deflated balloon; the poisonous injection paralyzed and dissolved everything of that frog but the skin. That water beetle sucked out the inside of the frog like a kid drinking the last drops of a milk shake. As the frog shrank and collapsed before her eyes, it was the most monstrous and terrifying thing she had ever seen. As far as I can tell, the humanist or secularist who says that all things are natural has no grounds for any moral outrage over anything. If everything is totally natural and inevitable on what ground can we be morally indignant about anything? Scriptures teach that disease, death, decay, hunger and poverty are not natural! They are distortions of the way things ought to be and one day will be. Jesus used His miracles to show us what things were like before sin and what they will be like when He returns to put the world to rights. The Apostle Paul says the whole world groans for the revealing of the Children of God. God's ultimate purpose is to redeem the universe and not just His people. Jesus is saying that if you know Me through My word, and through my deeds of healing people, spiritually, emotionally, physically and socially then you are part of My revolution. That kind of revolution was unexpected.

### **The Disciples: Inadequate**

Third, Jesus went out of His way to show that His disciples were woefully inadequate to accomplish His revolution. In v. 37, Jesus said to His disciples, "You feed them."<sup>4</sup> The "You" is emphatic. They responded sarcastically, "Shall we spend a year's of a man's hard earned salary on bread to accomplish this, when these people can easily go and get their own food?" John 6 tells us that would have only purchased a bite for each person. The request was ridiculous. Their push back was, "That's impossible!" This is Jesus' point. Some say that God would never ask you to do something that is impossible for you to do. Yet, they cannot feed these people, at least not in their own power. How did He accomplish this? He could have rolled up His sleeves and said "Open Sesame" or waved His wand and made silver platters stacked with food fall from heaven. Instead, He asked the disciples what they had. And then He took the five biscuits and two sardines and He had the people sit down. He consecrated it to God, and then He gave what He had to the disciples to give to everyone. And they all ate and were filled and they had twelve baskets full left over.

Notice that Jesus did not ask them to describe what they did *not* have. He called them to consider what they did have and then to offer that to God. Jesus' focus is not on what you do not have. He expresses little interest in what the church does not have, which is a constant source of conversation within churches. Instead, He directs their attention to what they do have. And He calls them to offer what they do have to Him. He could have fed them by raining down Big Macs from heaven. Instead, He used their feeble resources to do wondrous things. This is the way of His revolution. He says, "What I'm calling you to do is impossible, it will take a miracle. God's intention is not that we should become adequate in ourselves to our tasks. If we only accept the tasks that are adequate to our powers we will miss His call. The church is always in a crisis and always will be. Difficulties, limitations, insolvable problems, lack of people and money and endless misunderstandings and misrepresentations will always be part of the church. I heard Dr. Keller say that we are called not only to do our work in spite of these things; these things are precisely the condition requisite for the doing of it. In 2 Cor. 3:6 Paul says, "our adequacy is from God," In Jesus' revolution only the inadequate are adequate.

### **A Paradoxical Foundation: Self-Sacrificing Love**

Finally, Jesus' revolution was established on an unimaginable foundation. Vs. 41 reveals that Jesus took the bread, blessed the bread and broke it. Mark used two verbs. "Blessed" and "broke." These are the exact two words He used at the Last Supper (Mk.14:22). There He said, "This is my body." After He blessed it, He broke it. Jesus' revolution is the ultimate Exodus, the ultimate freedom and victory over the oppression of sin

---

top of the water: it was a monstrous and terrifying thing. I gaped, bewildered and appalled....I had read about the giant water bug, but never seen one....It eats insects, tadpoles, fish, and frogs....It seizes its victims with these legs, hugs it tight, and paralyzes it with enzymes injected during a vicious bite. That one bite is the only bite it ever takes. Through the puncture shoot the poisons that dissolve the victim's muscles and bones and organs-all but the skin-and through it the giant water bug sucks out the victim's body, reduced to a juice. [pp. 7-8]

<sup>4</sup>See Num. 11:13ff where Moses cried out to God, "Where am I going to find bread to feed all of these people?"

and death itself. Here is the unimaginable foundation of Jesus' revolution. On the cross, looking at those who were killing Him and those who rejected Him, Jesus said "Father forgive them" and then He died. Jesus blessed them (His enemies) and then *He* broke in pieces. Bread must be broken for people to eat it and live. On the cross the Bread of Life broke. If This Bread remained whole, we would not be able to live. But if It is broken, then you and I can live. Jesus said,

I am the Bread, I was torn into pieces so that you could be whole and live. I took your sin. I absorbed the judgment that you deserved. If I had stayed whole you would have been broken into pieces. But I was broken so you could be whole.

When you taste and see that you are saved by Jesus being broken for you that love will fill the emptiness for your deepest hunger. And having tasted bread like this, He then calls us to move into our world, to be broken as well, in order to make others whole. If we are to be like Jesus, it will mean that we too must move into the world, even the world of our enemies, who are disturbingly different than us. We remember that before God and outside of Christ's mercy we are all disturbingly different.

This is the Jesus revolution; this is His bread. Those who feast on Him, who taste and see the He is good, and learn from Him will follow His lead into His revolution. Someday, in the fullness of His kingdom He will satisfy every good hunger and more than you can possibly imagine.