

# *“The Miracle of a Question”*

John 6:1–21

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From the Pulpit

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## “The Miracle of a Question”

John 6:1–21

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Prayer for Illumination: O Holy One, come to us. Speak to us,  
Touch us, and Stir us through Your Word and through the  
Words that you place on each of our hearts. And, O God,  
may the words that I have to offer please You and honor You  
and glorify Your holy name. Amen!

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I’d like to begin this morning with a brief exercise – it’s not a quiz!  
Consider it more of a spiritual exercise, if you will.

I’m going to share some historic **questions** that have been asked of  
all of us – over time – and see if you remember who first spoke these  
words:

“Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, *‘What are you doing for others?’*” (The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.)

“God will NOT ask, *‘How many good things have you done in your life?’*  
Rather, God will ask, *‘How much LOVE did you put into what you did?’*”  
(Mother Teresa)

“What happens to a dream deferred?” (Langston Hughes, first line in  
his poem, ‘Harlem’)

“And ain’t I a woman?” (Sojourner Truth.)

(This last one is not a question but is a quote about a question.)

“And so, my fellow Americans: Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.”

(President John F. Kennedy)

Questions – profound and intentional questions such as these – often have the capacity to engage us on a deep level – and maybe even have the power to change our thinking and our behavior and even our hearts.

However, I do know (from a whole lot of personal experience!) that it is so easy to miss the deeper meaning of the questions – because many of us, I think, have that tendency to jump right into a problem-solving mode and focus on finding solutions.

During these past couple of weeks, as I have been wrestling with our Gospel reading from John for today, I realized, for the first time, how easy it is to completely miss – or dismiss – the question that Jesus poses to his disciple, Philip, in this familiar story:

In verse 5, Jesus asks him, *“Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?”*

And I suppose that it IS easy to **miss** that question because in this pericope, there’s not just one – but there are two – miracle stories! Jesus feeds the 5000 **AND** he walks on water – all in the same story!

And the other thing to keep in mind – now that our lectionary has shifted gears from Mark to John -- is that the writing style of John is significantly different than that of Mark.

As you may recall, the Gospel writer of Mark is direct, concise and even abrupt.

The Gospel of John, on the other hand, written perhaps 30 or so years after Mark, is noted for its deep and philosophical – and even mystical – style of writing.

(As an aside, I learned in seminary that you just gotta spend some time with John in order for the deeper meaning of the text to emerge!)

So – back to Jesus' question to Philip: *Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?*

Now, why would Jesus ask Philip that question? I mean, after all, Jesus is the all-knowing and all-powerful miracle worker! He already knows the answer to his own question, right?

Well, the Gospel writer of John certainly addresses any confusion that we may have in the next statement.

He writes: *Jesus said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.*

Some others translations word this phrase a bit differently, using the language: *Jesus said this to try him.*

And The Message paraphrase puts it this way: *Jesus said this to stretch Philip's faith.*

No matter **what** specific language is used, the Gospel writer of John is intentional in describing Jesus' ability to pose a powerful question – a question that fully engages his followers, as active participants, in his ministry.

And in this case, it was the ministry – and the miracle – of feeding the five thousand!

It was after Jesus questioned Philip for all of his disciples to hear that Andrew then responded.

Andrew looked around. He did an inventory, so to speak – and was able to identify some of the needed resources – that were already right there in their midst.

Andrew immediately reported back to Jesus and said: “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish.”

And then, Jesus took it from there!

He blessed the loaves and the fish – and to the amazement of the crowds – there was MORE than enough food to feed the multitudes – so much so that there were leftovers!

This well-known miracle story is also a shared ministry story – in that it engaged the followers of Jesus in the work of feeding those who were hungry.

We all have many different names and titles for Jesus – such as Miracle Worker, Healer, Leader, Rabbi, Teacher and Friend – but hearing our text again, at this time, reminds me that Jesus was also a Community Organizer.

Jesus knew how to engage those among him in order to address and meet the unmet needs of the people in their midst.

Jesus knew how to inspire others that they would also become active participants in ministry – by taking responsibility for assessing both the needs of the community as well as the available resources at hand.

And in this story, it all started with a question when Jesus asked, *“Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?”*

In this question, Jesus pushed the limits of his disciples' understanding. He challenged their feelings of resignation in response to overwhelming circumstances – and what appeared to be a hopeless situation.

And in this question, Jesus also extended an invitation – and an opportunity – to engage and participate in his ministry with and among and for the people.

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When and where in your life have you found yourself responding or organizing around a question that has been lifted?

Perhaps you can think of a time, here, within the life of the congregation at First Church – maybe a time when the needs of some of our members and friends were made known to you.

Or maybe YOU were the one to first ask that question that then inspired others to step forward to brainstorm together, to put a plan in place – and to create a new opportunity for shared ministry.

That is the power of the Holy Spirit moving in and through and among the people of God in order to do the work of the church – together.

And that, my friends, is nothing short of a miracle!

I'd like to close this morning with a favorite quote, some encouraging words that speak to the experience of holding the not-yet-answered questions of our lives.

These are the words of Rainer Maria Rilke in *Letters to a Young Poet* (written in 1929):

*Try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers which could not be given to you now because you would not be able to live with them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now.*

Thanks be to God!

