

Michelle James
Fish Series #5
John 6:1-15
“Dag Gadol”
August 12, 2007

There may be several reasons why, but this story, thrown in with our Bible fish stories, reminded me of a fish tale from my youth. I’m a land lubber, you know, so fish stories aren’t as plentiful or as colorful as my husband’s who grew up with very serious fishermen. In fact, where I’m from, there isn’t even all that much water! But there was a water and energy conservation interest in the 1940s which resulted in several “rivers” as they’re called (Tom laughs when he sees these little trickles of water running, or more likely, sitting stagnant, in the middle of the Kansas prairie), but several of these rivers in Kansas were dammed up and reservoirs were constructed. There just happened to be one of these reservoirs within a 30 minute drive of my hometown, so every summer, carloads of us young people would eagerly bounce down the county highway with the promise of cool, wet relief just down the road.

Now you might guess that Kansas is not a land of spring waters tumbling down a rocky mountain, or even a hillside, becoming purified as it makes its way toward the lakes. No, in fact, most of these rivers are more like brown, gummy, muddy guck which only a bullhead or channel catfish would appreciate, and maybe a crawdad or two. So you might imagine that the lakes in the heart of Kansas are not the sparkling clear, rocky mountain spring water you might find in a neighboring state. In fact, it’s rare that a swimmer will put his or her head under the water, for there is a strange-feeling muck that clings to any part of the brave or foolish.

But when I was a young soul venturing into the cool, murky waters of Kanopolis Lake, there was another reason we didn’t put our heads under the water. There was a tale in those days of a very large fish, dag gadol¹, that lived in the murky, mucky waters near the Kanopolis dam. I’m pretty sure this is the same tale that is told just about everywhere, but when we are young, we live for adventure and are susceptible to all sorts of excitement, real or concocted. This Kansas-bred tale involved a very, very big catfish which liked to hang out on a ledge near the hydroelectric intake pool. Of course, stray boaters and stranded water skiers were the most likely victims of this monster cat, and a swimmer or two who served as snacks between meals.

I learned recently that there was a boy scout troop in my hometown that qualified for their mile swim award by swimming across the lake, but not before sitting up late around the campfire the night before, telling monster catfish stories, and then swimming at a good clip across the lake trying to out-swim the monster cats which were surely coming after them.

I’m not sure why we tell such stories, except that we love to scare ourselves half to death, but there must be some basis in truth to these stories. In fact, I read a story of a catfish caught in the Mekong River in northern Thailand weighing in at a whopping 646 pounds. The huge fish was more than 6 feet long and at least the width of two men! I would not want to be on the receiving end of those fish lips. They’d hoped to release the fish for spawning upriver, but it didn’t survive the ordeal. So, they chopped it up and fed the people of the Thai village.

I don’t believe the fish in the boy’s basket that day on the hillside beside the Sea of Galilee was a 646 pound channel cat! In fact, it is much more likely that he was carrying some type of carp, or perhaps a couple of tilapia. The fish were probably a pound or so at the most. And the scripture records that the bread he was carrying was barley loaves, the bread of the poor. Probably not the nice, big bakery loaves we find at Panera or Buskin. It is unlikely that these couple of fish and the 5 loaves were the raw materials for a feast, but they were probably enough food to keep the young man for the day, maybe two. They didn’t have convenience stores or fast food restaurants on every hill in town, so folks in those days used to strap on a jar-like basket with provisions for the day, much like we would carry a backpack today.

So what's the deal with this story? It's an important story. In fact, it is important enough that it made all four gospels. Besides the crucifixion and the resurrection, the feeding of the 5000 is the only story that each of our gospel writers include in their version of the good news. And there's lots of disagreement about what really happened. Some folks believe that the boy's generosity inspired all the rest gathered there that day to open their baskets of provisions and share what they had as well. Some folks believe that there really was a miracle and Jesus used the pittance offered by the boy to make a meal that wouldn't stop. For many, it is a reminder of our communion with Christ and with one another.

But perhaps it is more than a cool story which punctuates the need to share, or more than a story which illustrates how Jesus takes common things, the bread and fish, using common Jewish meal practices, by the blessing and distribution of bread and the collection of the leftovers, and turning them into a holy practice. Perhaps the importance of this story is the realization that Jesus was actually giving the people an abundant share of himself. The emphasis in our passage is on the immense provision for an immense crowd from the immense gift of God in his Son.

Further insight might be gained if we look at the place our "big fish" story falls in the rest of John's story. After Jesus fed the 5000 men, and probably as many women and children, we are told that the people were impressed with the miracle they had witnessed and so believed that Jesus must be the prophet that was promised. He too had provided a kind of manna in the wilderness, and they were going to take him and make him their king. Surely he would bring them to their second exodus, freeing them from the oppression, feeding them in their wilderness to come. But what they thought would amount to elevating Jesus to a higher status, was in fact, lowering him to earthly standards. They didn't get that the miracle they had witnessed that day, and in fact, Jesus himself, was much greater than any earthly interpretation we might assign them.

If we follow John's story further, looking at the passage which comes after this, we recall that Jesus had gone off by himself to the mountain, having deftly avoided the crowd which wanted to crown him king. The people had been fed and satisfied, and now the disciples gather at the shore of the lake at sunset, getting into a boat and heading across the water to Capernaum, presumably to rest for the night. Their work here was finished. But just as they get about halfway across, when night had set in, the sea becomes rough. As they looked out over the dark waters, they see the figure of a man approaching the boat, a specter or ghost of some kind out on the watery chaos, coming for them in their vulnerable state. But they quickly realize it's no ghost, it's Jesus out on the water! Unlike Moses who parted the sea, Jesus is actually walking on it! They realize that this man must not be the simple Galilean they thought he was at the beginning. He is not only one who can do miraculous signs; he is also one who rules the sea itself, a symbol of God's power over darkness, evil, and chaos. The disciples are rightfully terrified, but as Jesus approaches the boat, he said to them the very thing which Moses heard when he encountered the burning bush, "It is I, do not be afraid." And suddenly they had reached their destination.

And in the end of this section of scripture, we learn that, in the morning, the crowd discovered that the disciples had taken off in the one boat left on the shore the night before, and went across the sea to Capernaum. They also realized that Jesus had not gone with the disciples in the boat, yet he and disciples were all gone. The people took the boats which the local fishermen had brought in that morning and went over to Capernaum looking for Jesus. They found him on the other side and questioned him. "Rabbi, how did you get here?"

Of course, this is just the opening Jesus needed. Jesus begins to lay out the whole story for them. He told them how they were only impressed by the miracle and that's why they came looking for him. They wanted more miracles, but that's missing the point. In fact, the bread they ate the day before was not the same as the manna in the wilderness as they had been saying, and even more to the point, the manna wasn't from Moses either, it was from God. And Jesus is from God. He is the bread from heaven, and that is what they really need. That is what they're really searching for, but they just can't see. They need the bread of heaven, the bread of life.

Jesus is that bread, that life, but the people are searching for quick fixes, easy work, and a little magic sprinkled in. In feeding the crowds, he shows that he is able to provide for his people. In walking on the water, he reveals his divinity. He is himself, the true source of their salvation, but the people simply don't get it.

And there are times when we follow Jesus like those crowds did. We want the magic, the quick fixes, the easy work. We want a king who will give us what we want and not place demands on us except to come and listen from time to time. But in our worship, in the very sacrament of communion which we celebrate, we proclaim that Jesus is for us the bread of life, the true source of our salvation, the one who fulfills the needs of his people. Yet we want for more. We want miracles. We want magic. Jesus gives us all we could ever need, but we see the earthly things, the things of this life, and want those things for our lives. We forget that Jesus has overcome the powers of darkness, evil and chaos. We forget that our satisfaction comes not from the things of this earth, but in the immense provision for an immense crowd from the immense gift of God in his Son.

And we too have become the very body of Christ. We have become the immense provision for the immense crowd from the immense gift of God in his Son. We have been filled, sustained, gifted, and sent, but the storms come up and our boats are rocked. We are fearful of the things of this world. Our neighbors may talk about us if we take a stand. We are afraid that we may lose our health, our quality of life, our status, our positions. We continue to work for the things that sustain us in this world, the food that perishes. We forget that Jesus is the bread of our very lives, the food of eternal life, and that food is from our Father.

So what will it take for us to believe, and to live like we do? Let us remember each Lord's Day as we are reminded in our worship, that Jesus is the true bread of heaven, the one who alone provides for our every need. Let us remember each morning when we draw breath, that God alone sustains us and sends us the bread of heaven each day. When the storms arise, let us put our faith in God, and trust in Christ, not looking to the things of this world, but believing that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, and that in believing, we may have eternal life.

And may we too become the immense provision for the immense crowd from the immense gift of God in his Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

ⁱ Hebrew, "big fish"