

Growing up I loved school, like LOVED it. All throughout my school experience...grade school and middle school and high school, undergraduate and then my master's in divinity; I enjoyed tests. Surprise quizzes, timed tests, and finals. Even comprehensive finals, those tests the teacher starts talking about on the first day of class.

Tests are stretching, challenging, you find out if you understood the main point of what you are supposed to be learning. I enjoyed tests in school.

Unfortunately, the disciples did not have that luxury. They are tested in the "classroom of real life", and Jesus is testing his disciples to see how they are doing in their faith and trust in him.

That Jesus issued a test, here...and this intrigued me, and even challenged me.

It's only a few days before the Passover Festival and Jesus had been teaching the crowd all day long. Jesus sees the crowd. He really sees them and knows they are hungry. Hungry for more than food. But Jesus knows they are poor and didn't pack a meal. He understands their physical hunger too. No McDonalds anywhere in sight.

Here's the tests' first question, **"Jesus said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?"** ⁶ **He asked this only to test Philip, for he already had in mind what he was going to do."**

Jesus gave a surprise pop quiz to Philip. Right in the middle of Philip's real life. It wasn't a book quiz, or a test administered in a sterile classroom. No, it was real life, the nitty gritty, with real life implications.

Have you had a similar experience? Can you remember a time when the Lord tested your faith? When was the last time Jesus challenged your faith? When, in the middle of your life, did you see real needs and tried to meet them trusting Jesus would help you?

In preparing for today, I remembered a time when Jesus really stretched me, tested me. Young Christian, just a few years into what it meant to be a follower of Jesus. I had just stepped into full-time ministry. I was now responsible, among other things, for the Ushers and Greeter Ministries in a mega church of 2 to 3 thousand.

We were low on Ushers and Greeters, no leaders, showing up to serve was kinda iffy for people, volunteers were discouraged. When I started on staff, a few greeters and ushers felt like they could quit now because someone was being paid to do this. It wasn't looking good.

Part of the problem is that we met in a high school gym. Meaning greeters had multiple entrances to cover, head on a swivel, unenviable task of "Please no food or drinks."

And the Ushers, served in a darkened gym. They had to climb old wooden bleachers that would creak and sway alarmingly, just to collect the offering. Felt like a pirate swaying in the riggings. Arg...give me your gold!

In the middle of all that, somehow, I had come across this text. Maybe the pastor preached on Jesus feeding the 5,000 with the five loaves and two fish. And I felt just like Philip, like I had been given a test. With Jesus quietly watching and waiting to see how I would respond.

Sitting in my office, sweating in desperation, I remember I did something new with my faith. I made up a prayer and didn't tell a soul for years. I called it "My five and two", based on the five loaves and two fishes the boy gave to Jesus. It was without words and I would do this...palm and two fingers.

When I would get discouraged or anxious about these two ministries, I would "pray" it, lifting it up to the Lord even as I talked to people on the phone. Wordlessly pleading, **"Jesus do something with my little efforts and little abilities!"**

I was being tested and stretched!

And so was Philip.

Philip's response to Jesus' question is immediate. As he looks at the world through a very practical and earth-bound lens. He tells Jesus clearly this can't be done. There is not enough money to buy food for the crowd. It's hopeless. Nothing we can do.

I wonder the look on Jesus' face? Dismayed? Or smiling, knowing Philip's lack of faith?

Oh, Philip. How can you not know WHO is asking you this question? Have you forgotten so quickly WHO is who standing in front of you giving you this test?

Prior to this test. Philip had experienced Jesus doing many amazing things that must have stretched his faith and the faith of the other disciples.

First, a little miracle of tracking someone down. Jesus found Philip under a tree and called him to follow.

Then at a wedding, he watched Jesus turn water into wine. A tremendous scandalous amount of excellent wine was created by Jesus. Then Jesus taught Nicodemus and the woman at the well how to have new life in him. More disciples follow, many Samaritans believe.

Jesus heals a sick boy long-distance without touching him. And then healed a man who had been severely handicapped from birth.

Jesus had therefore, already proven himself Lord over old faith/cheap wine, all illnesses, rampant unbelief and racial tensions. And Philip saw all of this and much more firsthand.

Do you want to try answering Jesus' question again, Philip? Do you want to retake that test? To look past the situation, to look at this situation with all those miracles in mind?

Here, in the feeding of the 5000, is one of the signs in the gospel of John that reveals who Jesus is. Jesus as Lord of all, the Passover Lamb, the Messiah and Savior. Apart from the resurrection, it is the only miracle or sign that is found in all four gospels.

This test, this encounter with feeding the crowd, is an example of the table fellowship or communion that was at the center of Jesus' ministry. Jesus proves he will feed his people spiritually and physically. And he invites the crowd to break bread with him based on love and grace. The crowd did nothing to earn this food. And Jesus provides abundantly.

While Jesus could have performed this sign by himself, he chooses to test Philip, and at the same time test Andrew's faith, and the boy's faith. And maybe even ours.

And in that test Jesus demonstrates the quality of faith he is looking for in them and in us. By what he does with the boy's willingness to share his five small loaves and two fish, more the size of sardines historically. A meal for a small boy.

Jesus meets Philip, Andrew and the little boy each at their place of ability to trust the Lord...from none, to some, to more faith proven by giving the whole meal away. And in all that, Jesus was seeking to help them grow and take another step of faith.

By showing them what will happen when they trust the Lord, even with a little. How the Lord takes our little offerings...of time, energy, gifts, mustard seed of faith, a little emoney and multiplies it, grows it to meet large needs in the crowd, in the community.

Then in asking the disciples to gather up the leftover bread, Jesus is doing two important things. He emphasizes the miracle that has taken place. That is was real.

And he invites them to participate in being a part of that miracle by feeding the others in need, touching the community. They become participants in Jesus' work of serving and feeding others. That is what disciples do.

It is important for us to recognize that Jesus understood attending to basic physical needs in the crowd/in the larger community...as an essential place to trust the Lord. As an essential place for our faith to grow. That Jesus will do something beyond our ability to comprehend with our faith-based actions to meet real practical needs.

When you are tested and stretched in matters of faith, this is what you can learn. Jesus will graciously take what little you can give and multiply it and apply it to meet big needs.

So, back to the test I was taking way back 24 years ago. Back to my real-life testimony of Jesus at work in my life.

In a short while, the number of Greeters serving doubled. The number of Ushers more than doubled. Leaders stepped up. We offered training, cohesion and morale improved. They

grew in seeing themselves as people ministering in the name and in the service of Jesus. They began praying for the people as they came into the high school gym to worship.

There was a whole new spirit in these ministries! They understood their essential service Sunday after Sunday, of welcoming people as Christ. They understood they were ushering people into God's Presence week after week, changed lives were on the rise.

Powerful changes in the hearts and perspectives of the Ushers and Greeters. I didn't do that. And even more life transformation than I could ever calculate happened in the lives of those the Greeters and Ushers began to minister to.

I believe Jesus brought these changes and touched more lives through their efforts. Jesus abundantly answered my "5 and 2" prayer.

This week I sat down with Debbie and Ondrea and they began to help me get up to speed on fall programming and looking at the whole year. During that conversation, they began to explain a wonderful ministry we have here called Meals and Missions.

It is a quarterly event, for all the generations...kids to grandparents, providing opportunities for us as a faith community, to make a difference in our community and around the world. A ministry effort that can gather the little bit you have and a little bit I can do, pool it together and give it away to those in need. Beautiful!

Four times a year...October, December, February and May, everyone gathers on a Wednesday evening, eat a meal together, and then work on a mission project of some kind.

October of last year, they made tie blankets for the Wright County Humane Society. In December, they put together anywhere from 150 to 180 fruit baskets for financially disadvantaged families.

In February, they created Bags of Love for our homebound congregation members and gave left over bags to those living in the local nursing home. In May, they put together Personal Dignity Kits for UMCOR for people in disadvantaged countries overseas. Good work!

If you don't really know how to invest in our community, consider simply attending our Meals and Missions, 4x a year. We are fortunate to have that kind of ministry in our congregation!

As we close, we too are going to take a pop quiz. As we move into our time of reflection...consider deeply, answer with your life this ONE single multiple choice question.

From this story, which kind of faith does Jesus prefer? What kind of community influencing kind of faith is the kind of faith the Lord is calling us to have? A) Philip's faith? B) Andrew's faith? Or C) the faith of the little boy?