

"Getting the Point"

The theologian who wrote the Gospel of John was clearly trying to cover a lot of bases. So the reader can assume that there's probably not just one point going on in any one text, but several.

To assert that this Gospel was authored by a theologian — and a fine one at that! — isn't, of course, to suggest that the three Synoptic Gospels were written by non-theologians or without theological bias. Nor is it to suggest that, at times, the authors of Mark, Matthew, and Luke couldn't play with numerous themes in any particular text, making it strenuous to identify their central point. By now, in the history of biblical interpretation, it's taken for granted that every writer of scripture brings a theological perspective to her or his narratives.

But among the Gospel-writers, the Johannine theologian clearly is unmatched in the capacity to pack in the most interpretive freight.

All of this can be seen in the only major story from Jesus' ministry that is common to all four Gospels (except those dealing with Jesus' last days): the feeding of the thousands — or as the traditional summary phrase names it: the Multiplication.

It is widely assumed that even though Mark, the earliest Gospel, and John, the latest, share a lot of common material, there is enough difference between them to hold that the writers relied on two independent sources (with Matthew and Luke drawing on Mark), dealing with the same incident in the life of Jesus.

The bare bones version of the incident goes something like this for all four of the accounts:

- Jesus continues to attract crowds with his teaching and healing, even when he and the disciples try to get away for some time by themselves.
- On one such occasion, the crowds stick around although it's near the time of the evening meal and there's no place to find food anywhere near.
- A panicky question arises about how the crowd will be fed.
- A disciple remarks that only five loaves and a few fish can be found in the entire crowd.
- Jesus has the disciples bring the loaves and fishes to him; he looks to heaven and blesses the food, then breaks the bread and divides the fishes.
- There is enough food for everyone to be satisfied and still there are twelve full baskets of leftovers.

Anyone who knows the four versions of this story realizes that each Gospel author spins the barebones of it to make one or more interpretive points (and maybe also to juice up the narrative a bit to make it more interesting).

But John's Gospel is the most juiced up of them all. Unlike the three Synoptic Gospels, in which the *disciples* take the initiative of asking what should be done to feed the

people, the narrator in the Gospel of John has *Jesus* ask the disciple Philip where they should purchase bread for the people to eat, and then the Gospel-writer parenthetically adds that: "Actually, of course, he [Jesus] was perfectly aware of what he was going to do, but he asked this to test Philip's reaction." Philip tells Jesus that they don't have enough cash on hand to buy the bread that would give everyone just a mouthful.

Moreover, to connect Jesus with the Hebrew scriptures, there are also allusions to Moses on the mountain and possibly the prophets Elijah and Elisha; and there are hints of Jesus' messiahship to be fully revealed at the forthcoming Passover celebration; and there are suggestions about what would become the Eucharist by references to the broken bread.

And then at end of the Johannine narrative it is reported that given what the people had seen ("the sign he had performed") they were sure that Jesus was the promised prophet or messiah. And in response, the text reports, "Jesus realized that they [the people] would come and carry him off to make him king, so he fled back to the mountain alone."

There's no question that there is a lot of theology going on here.

All of this "interpretive freight," however, can obscure what is rather obviously the central point of the bare bones narrative that all four of the Gospels share: *that everyone of the hungry people get fully fed and yet there are leftovers.*

Yes, Jesus performs the miracle — the Multiplication — but the purpose of it is that *the needs of the people are more than met.*

If there is a theological point to make, it is that, in Jesus' world, God's provisions for the world's life are abundant — even more than abundant. It follows, then, that out of that divine abundance we are to do God's will and work to be sure that the needs of all are met. Like Jesus, we are to turn to God, seek God's blessing, and take responsibility for distributing God's abundant provisions for everyone.

Understand, I'm not arguing that all the *other* theological points about this shared narrative that the author of John and the other Gospel-writers are making turn out to be wrong or irrelevant. My only concern is that those other theological points not distract or diminish our getting *the* point.

And that, it seems to me, has particular pertinence to time a when people are hungry, or suffering, or losing their jobs and their homes or their health insurance, or whatever they need in order to have the life that God intends for them.

Especially now, we need to get that point.

The national debate on health care reform, it turns out, is not whether there is enough money to cover everyone. There clearly is enough, and more. The debate is about whether some people and professions and industries should be able to keep a lot of their money at the expense of the health and life of others who don't have enough to secure

health coverage, or if the abundance of money should be distributed in ways that everyone is covered.

The debate in the states is similar: even in a time of national and global economic distress, whether taxes should be raised on those with abundant income and wealth so that children can receive the kind of education they need, so that families can receive the kind of services they need, so that institutions and organizations can receive the funds to help people stay healthy and sane and productive.

In short, we do not, even in these distressful economic times, face a global problem of famine or scarcity; we face a global problem of how we will deal with the problem of abundance so unequally divided.

So we really shouldn't read about the Multiplication in any of the four Gospels and get distracted by the variety of theological points being set forth. We need, instead, to get *the* point.