

Pop Quiz

John 6:1-21

As most of you know, I am rather fond of Diet Coke. What you don't know is that I owe my grade in biochemistry to it. Well, not to Diet Coke itself, but to the artificial sweetener in it, NutraSweet or Aspartame. When I was in college, Diet Coke didn't exist yet. We still drank Tab, which was sweetened with saccharine, if memory serves me. But I digress.

This is how it happened. Dr. Bosch, my biochem professor had a fondness for giving pop quizzes, whether out of sheer meanness or some pedagogically motivated reason, I don't know. But being the procrastinator that I am, I hated them. I remember going to class one day feeling particularly unprepared and, knowing that I was unprepared, feeling equally certain that that would be the day he gave us one. Sure enough, when he walked into the lecture hall, he had that look in his eye; I could see it. We could all see it. We were doomed, or at least I was. But then he giggled in a very uncharacteristic way and told us we were off the hook. He was feeling benevolent. The FDA had just given aspartame the green light after a long battle, and his stock in Searle had gone through the roof. He made a small fortune.

I'm sure it was not out of sheer meanness that Jesus gave pop quizzes from time to time, but he was as fond of giving them as Dr. Bosch was. I have an idea that part of Jesus enjoyed watching people squirm a bit, but being the teacher that he was, he gave them for the usual reasons – to see what they knew, what they understood so far. To make sure they were keeping up with him.

John doesn't say whether or not they passed today's quiz, but they certainly answered predictably. Jesus had invited the tired disciples to come away to a quiet place and rest for a while, but the crowds followed them, wanting more – more teaching, more signs, more Jesus. Jesus sees them coming –how could you not see five thousand people headed your way – and throws out the question: where on earth are we going to get food to feed all these people? And Phillip, who still hasn't figured out that, with Jesus, there is no such thing as an idle question, does some quick figures in his head, pulls out the check book, and announces that feeding them is a fiscal impossibility, at least this year. Maybe in a couple of years when they have more followers and more backing they might be able to, but even then, they might want to think about whether or not underwriting the total cost of a program of that magnitude might set an unwise precedence.

In other words, we can't, Jesus. It's impossible. There are too many people, and being out of work as we have been since we've been following you, there are too few dollars. Practically speaking – and really, what other way is there – while it's a nice idea to think that we might be able to feed them all so they can stay and listen to you and be healed, it's just not doable. Sorry.

There are, of course, other versions of this pop quiz. How on earth are we going to raise our kids to be faithful disciples and followers of Jesus when it takes so many people to teach them and cook for them, and take them places and spend time with them, and we're already so busy?

What on earth are we going to do about our dwindling population of young adults and families? If we keep going at this rate the church won't be around in another twenty years!

Where, exactly, are you going to find the time to do everything you already have to do and also volunteer down at the homeless shelter?

Just where do you think you're going to find the money to help them out when your budget's already stretched as far as it can go?

How on earth are you going to be able to care for your aging parents when you can hardly manage to keep your own life going?

And usually, we answer like Phillip did, assuming that it is a straightforward question. We do the math, we pull out our calendars, we do a quick assessment of our already fragile mental health, and we come to the conclusion that it is an impossibility. The need is too great, and what we have is too little. The problem is too overwhelming. The changes that would need to be made are too vast and sweeping and too risky. Or maybe, we just don't know where to start and we don't have the expertise to pull it off. Sorry, but it can't be done. Or maybe it can be done, if we can just work out a good plan, the right way of going about it. But that, too, is risky. What if it doesn't turn out? What if it fails? Maybe we shouldn't even attempt it.

We answer with cold, hard facts and figures, with rational reasons, excuses, doubts, fears. It can't be done. It's too much for me. The problem is too great. There's nothing we can do about it.

I used to grade ordination exams for our denomination, and 9 times out of 10, the reason someone failed an exam is because they didn't answer the question that was asked. Listen to the question that Jesus asked the disciples: Where are we going **to be bread** for all these people? Now, maybe I'm just splitting hairs, but the question Jesus asked them wasn't a question of feasibility or possibility. He didn't ask if they could feed them all, or where would the money come from to buy all that food. But that's what they heard. Is it possible to feed all these people, with resources as meager as they are? No. It isn't.

But Jesus wasn't asking them if it was possible, or if it was practical or reasonable, or if there was enough money in the bank or enough time or enough volunteers. He wasn't even asking them how they would do it. The question Jesus was really asking them was, will you trust me? Will you trust that I can do this? Can you set aside all of your leaden ideas about what is and isn't possible, what is and isn't doable? Can you give up your small thoughts about what you're capable of, and what is completely overwhelming and scary? Will you keep your doubts in check?

Jesus isn't testing us to see if we can figure it out ourselves, if we can accomplish it ourselves. He's testing us to see if we know who he is. Do we believe that this itinerate preacher and all-around good guy and storyteller that we've been following around is really God? Do we believe that God is capable of far greater things than we are? Impossible things?

I never was much of a cheater, but I'm going to give you the answer to Jesus' little pop quizzes. The next time God asks you, or us, one of those tricky questions, he's not looking for a well-reasoned yes or no. The bottom line. He's not interested in hearing about your fears, or our doubts about why it won't work, or the problem's too big. The next time Jesus points out a need, a huge need – a hungry crowd, a homeless family, a bunch of church kids who need dinner once a week, a parent who needs your attention – and asks what we can do about it, this is the answer he's looking for: you just shrug, and say, "I have no idea. But I'm not going to worry about it. If you want them fed, it will happen. If you want this church to grow, you will show us the way. If you need me to cook or give my time, I'll trust that I've got what you need from me. Sure looks to me like I can't do it. As far as I can tell I don't have the answers or the imagination or the skill or the time. Maybe not even the desire. But what I think or feel or believe doesn't matter a lot. All that matters is that I remember that you are God, and I trust that, if this is what you want, you can make it happen."