

When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ *When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.*

¹⁵ *As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.”*

¹⁶ *Jesus replied, “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.”*

¹⁷ *“We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,” they answered.*

¹⁸ *“Bring them here to me,” he said.* ¹⁹ *And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people.* ²⁰ *They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.* ²¹ *The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children. (Matthew 14:13-21)*

See the Real Jesus!

Does anybody know the real you? There’s a difference between the way people see us and the way we see ourselves. Most pastors can tell you stories – if they’re willing – of times when members said very complimentary things, and it made us uncomfortable because it didn’t seem to be true to us. Those members were giving us way too much credit. Sadly, the opposite is also true. Most pastors can tell you stories – if they’re willing – of people who believed we were arrogant or unfaithful or unloving. Sometimes, those criticisms hurt because they were too true. But sometimes, they seemed terribly unfair. I would guess that pastors aren’t the only people who have experienced that. Most of us find that people see us differently than we see ourselves. Even Jesus had to deal with that problem. It didn’t end when he ascended into heaven. For two thousand years, the church and Western society have wrestled with who Jesus is. In modern times, that question has taken on a new urgency, as people have tried to find ways to relate an ancient religion to modern ways of thinking. All too often, what happens is that people recreate Jesus in their own image. They ignore what the Bible says about him and try to construct a version of Jesus that they’re more comfortable with. Today, he’s often presented as a kind of glorified social worker, or therapist, or social protester. None of those visions of him are true. Today, we have a gospel lesson that zeroes on Jesus, and as we look at what he did and said, take care to **see the real Jesus!**

I.

If you really want to get to know someone, you need to spend time with them and see them in different situations. Understanding what you see in those moments is the key to really knowing that person. The same is true for Jesus, so God shows him to us in real life situations, doing real life things. Today, **see the real Jesus in a moment of sadness.**

Matthew wrote, **“When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.”** What had happened? John the Baptist had been murdered. Herod – the son of the King Herod who killed the babies of Bethlehem – had thrown John in prison because Herod had taken his brother’s wife and John wasn’t afraid to call that sin. But Herod was afraid to execute John. Herod’s wife, however, wanted John dead and after a wild birthday party, she manipulated her husband into killing him. That’s the news that Jesus heard.

John was a relative of Jesus. John had baptized Jesus and prepared the way for Jesus to begin his ministry. And his senseless death affected the Lord. He withdrew to solitary place. Have you ever needed some time alone when you got some bad news? Jesus did, too. He probably planned to take some time to pray and remember and grieve. Does that surprise you? Certainly, Jesus was not surprised by John’s death. He knew all things. So why did that death affect him so much? Because Jesus is a real human being. The only difference between him and us is that he had no sin, so when this bad news came, he didn’t blame God or take his hurt out on other people. But Jesus did hurt, just like we do when someone we love dies. Seeing his hurt and his need to take some time to heal helps us to see the real Jesus, the one who was like us in every way.

Except that he had no sin. You see that here, too. Jesus' plan was to get into a boat on the Sea of Galilee and have his disciples row him to a quieter part of the shore. But when the people realized what he was doing, they went ahead on foot, around the lake and they beat Jesus to the shore he was heading for. When Jesus got out of the boat, a large crowd was there waiting for him, so the only time alone that he got was the time they were in the boat.

How did Jesus react? Did he say, "I need some time to myself, come back tomorrow"? Did he put his needs ahead of the crowd's? No. Would it have been wrong for Jesus to take a day to reflect and mourn and heal? Of course not. But instead, he stopped and healed the sick in that crowd. Matthew says that he had compassion on them. Jesus didn't do this because he had to. He didn't sigh and wish that he could just get a moment's peace. He didn't feel sorry for himself or display bad temper. You and I might do all of those things in a similar situation. But Jesus saw the crowd hurting and it reminded him that he wasn't the only one who was hurting that day. The pain he felt in losing John was multiplied thousands of times over in people who were sick and hurting. And Jesus healed them.

What does that show us about our Lord? His perfect love. The truth is, when we see how Jesus acted here, it's hard not to feel guilty about all the times we had a bad day and took it out on someone else. How many of us have bit off somebody's head because we were just unhappy about something? It had nothing to do with that person but they paid the price. It's just sin for us to make other people suffer because we're unhappy. It's one of the most self-centered things we can do and it happens all the time. But Jesus didn't do that. Instead, he put his hurt aside and ministered to the hurts of others because he was perfect in love.

But he wasn't perfect to make us feel guilty. It is true that Jesus is the ultimate role model. We can do no better than to live like he did. But Jesus wasn't perfect to establish the standard we're supposed to live up to. God already did that in the Bible. Jesus was perfect in our place. He was perfect in loving others, perfect in putting their needs ahead of us own, perfect in serving God by serving his people every single day of his life, because that's what God calls us to be and not one of us can do it. All those times that we've felt sorry for ourselves and bit off people's heads and then tried to make it their fault for daring to interrupt our lives – all that shows how much we need Jesus. So he came and he replaced our sinful lives with his perfect life. Now, that's all God sees. He sees us putting our hurt aside to love the people around us. And he calls us perfect. He sees us nailed to a cross and suffering all that our sins deserve, because Jesus did that, too. And because Jesus paid for all those sins, God says that we are forgiven. Our debt is paid. There is nothing left in our record to punish us for. So we will live forever. Jesus rose to make sure we see that. Today, we see the love and the perfection that made that resurrection happen.

II.

All that happened before the really famous part of this gospel lesson: the feeding of the five thousand. This miracle is one of only a handful of events that's recorded in all four gospels. That's how important this miracle was. Jesus did it to make to show his people who he really was: the Savior sent from God. My friends, **see the real Jesus in a moment of power.**

Of course, there was already another moment of power when Jesus healed the sick. But feeding the crowds was something he only did twice. The miracle began with the disciples trying to copy the compassion Jesus showed. They came to him because they were out in the middle of nowhere. The people had hiked out there and there was no food. At the end of the lesson Matthew tells us that there were 5000 men there plus women and children. If whole family groups came, that would easily double the number of people. If the crowd was mostly men, it might increase it less, but even so, thousands of people in the middle of nowhere needed to eat. The disciples were concerned.

The only solution they saw was to dismiss the crowd so they could go to the surrounding villages and buy food. But Jesus' said, "**You give them something to eat.**" You can almost hear them sputtering when they answer that there was a boy there whose mom had packed him a lunch – five pieces of bread and two little fish – but that was sheer desperation. How could they feed so many?

Well, Jesus, of course, knew how. He had the crowd sit down on the grass and he did a miracle. It began with him doing what many of us do before we eat: he gave thanks to God for the food they were about to receive. Again, that shows us the real Jesus. In spite of the power he possessed, his Father in heaven sent him to this earth. The Son of God made himself nothing and took on the form of a servant. So all his life on this

earth, he followed his Father's directions. He prayed and gave thanks because that's what servants do when their God and Father takes care of them.

But once he prayed, Jesus showed who he really was: God the Son, the One who existed before all things and through whom the Father made the world. Jesus took that little boy's lunch and he fed thousands of people with it. Matthew says, **"They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over."** Only the God who made the world and who put in place the laws of nature can suspend those laws and make something out of next to nothing. In this miracle we see the real Jesus.

But notice how Jesus used that power: he provided for his people. The Son of God could certainly use his power to strike down his enemies, to cast the devil and the evil angels into hell, to make unbelievers pay. And Jesus will do those things on Judgment Day. But judgement is not Jesus' true work. It's something he does because our sin demands it. What Jesus always wants is to love. He wants to forgive sinners. He wants to take the broken hearted into his arms and comfort them. He wants to heal the sick and feed the hungry. Jesus wants to love us every single day. When he did this miracle he was showing us who we follow.

Our needs matter to Jesus. Our hurts matter to Jesus. Now, I wish I could say that means that he will always do miracles and make them go away. I wish I could go to the hospital when you're sick and touch you and make you better. I wish I could take a loaf of bread and feed all of you, especially if your family is going through tough times. But Jesus never promised us that he would use miracles to take care of us. He used miracles in the Bible to make it clear to us that he has the power to take care of us and that he loves us enough to do it. But most of the time, he hides that power because we still live in a sinful world. So he works through doctors and nurses and medicines and surgeries. He works through jobs and investments and even through stimulus checks. He works through family and friendship. He works through the church and her ministry and her fellowship. And he takes care of us.

But sometimes, he allows difficulties to come. Sometimes, he puts us in a situation where only a miracle can make us whole. Christians get COVID and cancer and other horrible diseases. Christians sometimes die from those diseases and sometimes they live for years in pain. And it's hard to see Jesus working when we suffer those things. But he is. He is doing all that is best for us. Because we can't see all that he's doing, he points us to miracles like the feeding of the five thousand and he says, "The same love that I had for those people there, I have for you today. The same power that I used to do that miracle then, I am using today to guide and direct your life, even if you can't see it and even you don't understand it. I died to give you life. I rose to bring you home to heaven. I love you and all that I am doing is for your good. Trust me."

That's why he shows us himself today. No good can come from us recreating Jesus in an image that we think makes more sense in the modern world. When Jesus fed the five thousand, he showed us who he is: the Son of God who was made man to stand in our place and win eternal life for us. That God of love is with us and he will take care of us all the days of our lives. He will bring us home to heaven. Trust in him. Amen.