

No One Like Jesus: Faith 101
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Deuteronomy 8:1-6; Acts 2:22-24; Matthew 14:13-21

Today's final Scripture reading comes from Matthew 14:13-21. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. "When Jesus heard what had happened [to John the Baptist], he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. 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." Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered. "Bring them here to me," he said. 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. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children."

What's beyond your wildest imagination? That phrase is an old way marketers have used to get us to think their movie is better than anything else you could do with your weekend. "Beyond your wildest imagination" was the tag line for the animated *Transformers* movie, the fantasy film *Willow*, even an old scary movie called *Vault of Horror*. How exciting would it be to see something truly beyond anything we could come up with in our own minds!

Yet what's funny, when you look at science fiction and fantasy today, you see that we rarely do get beyond our wildest imaginations. Harry Potter, Star Trek, the Lord of the Rings, Dune, the Chronicles of Narnia, even older stuff like H.G. Wells War of the Worlds – the vast majority of it concerns creatures that look like us and act like us. Even if they have talking animals, the talking just makes them more like humans! It turns out our imaginations aren't all that wild after all.

Our imaginations are so dull that a story like today's immediately makes us skeptical. As we've studied Matthew's gospel together, Jesus' miracles up to this point haven't stretched our imagination too far; we can believe he healed someone, for example, because we've seen modern doctors do amazing things. But feeding the 5,000 with almost nothing is a miracle beyond explanation. It goes beyond our imagination.

This is the point in Matthew's gospel that we must conclude that Jesus was no ordinary man. Of all Jesus' miracles, only two are reported in all four gospel accounts: this one and Jesus' resurrection. For one, it's Jesus' most widely seen miracle – it affects perhaps 10,000 people when women and children are counted. But two, it separates out those who will believe that Jesus can do the impossible and those who won't. Did Jesus convince the crowds to share their lunches? To not be greedy? No. That's nor miracle. Jesus, the Son of God, molds reality to His will so that the crowds are fed full.

As fantastic as it was that Jesus could feed an enormous crowd, there's far more here than the miraculous creation of fish and bread. Jesus' loving nature comforts us. Jesus' Kingdom inspires us. And Jesus' command to His disciples challenges us. Let's look at each one.

When we start at the beginning, if you don't know or love Jesus already, this should make you want to know Him more: *Jesus finds compassion in the midst of His own grief*. Apart from the death of His close friend Lazarus, there is no other event during Jesus' ministry more devastating than the death of John the Baptist. John was the greatest prophet ever, the one who made the way clear for Jesus to do His ministry. He baptized Jesus. He was loyal and righteous, even though his stand for God cost him his life. But more than that, John was his cousin. John and Jesus had known each other all their lives. John was Jesus' friend. Now that John was gone, Jesus' own death at the hands of the authorities in Jerusalem would be soon at hand.

It was an agonizing time for Jesus. When He hears about it, he takes a boat to someplace private – to talk to the Father, to mourn, and to grieve. For while Jesus will conquer death and hell through His own death and resurrection, while He is still completely and truly God, He is also completely and truly human. He will miss the presence of His dear cousin as long as He is here completing His mission to save humanity. He is sad because death is the result of human sin and rebellion against God. He understands even more than we do the depths of the tragedy of humanity's choice to turn away from God.

But the crowds come after Him. The Sea of Galilee isn't that big. Somebody spots Him, and the crowds leave their towns and villages in order to meet Him, to be healed by Him, to learn who this incredible man is. Jesus sees the large crowd and has compassion on them. The word here in Greek isn't sympathy – He doesn't feel badly for them. Even in the depths of His own pain, He understands their pain and helps them out of genuine love.

This amazes me. On Sunday afternoon once I've rehearsed with the praise team and led worship and preached, my first thought is not, "Who can I help next? Who can I listen to next?" My first thought is, "What am I gonna eat?" That's not even after a huge blow like the one Jesus received; this is just life! We're all willing to help a little, but our compassion has limits. And in times of grief, we're looking to *receive* compassion, not give it to a huge crowd of people.

That's how Jesus is different, and why we can trust and rely on Him. It's my prayer that you know Jesus and have asked Him for forgiveness and salvation. But maybe you haven't. People have a hard time trusting that they need God's forgiveness, but they also have a hard time accepting that God could forgive them. We've broken God's law, we've offended Him, and we know we aren't good people at heart. We don't deserve forgiveness. Many of us feel unlovable. We think if other people knew who we really were and what we'd done, they would hate us.

But that's the thing about Jesus – at His most vulnerable, in the moments in His life when He was most troubled, He is the most relatable to us and the most compassionate. When we would say, "Go away and leave me alone," Jesus goes to the crowds and heals the sick. Jesus loves us not only at our worst, but at His worst. In His trying moments, He cares deeply for us.

The apostle Peter, speaking in Acts 2 and Acts 10 about what Jesus has done, says, “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins...everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” Peter knew because Peter experienced that forgiveness. In Peter’s darkest moment, He denied knowing Jesus three times. Yet Jesus forgave him and restored him to the fellowship of the apostles. Having spent three years at Jesus’ side, Peter knew Jesus’ compassion and love and forgiveness personally, and he spent the rest of his life encouraging others to turn from sin and turn to Jesus.

If you are sick and hurting, turn to Jesus. If you have sin that you haven’t confessed to God, turn to Jesus. If you’re running from something and don’t know where to turn, turn to Jesus. If your life is fantastic and things couldn’t be better, turn to Jesus! He is compassion. He is love. He is mercy and grace. No matter how close to God or how far from God you are, He is there, ready to show you the compassion He poured out on the crowd in Galilee.

But the unbelievable compassion of Jesus isn’t the only miracle on display in this passage. The next miracle is this: *the Kingdom of Heaven comes to us when Jesus, the Son of God, creates the new Israel in our midst.* To understand what’s going on here, we need to know the history of God’s people. So let’s look back for a minute so we can look forward.

When God brought the Hebrews out of Egypt, He fed them for forty years with manna that appeared outside their tents every morning. He kept them alive while they wandered for forty years. During that time, He made good on His promises to their forefather Abraham over 400 years earlier. The nation of Israel became a reality. The Israelites were God’s chosen people. He made them His prized possession. He called them to walk blamelessly before Him, and He would save them from their enemies and bless their land. They would be His people, and He would be their God.

Move forward 1400 years. The people of Israel forget God over and over in their history. They sacrificed to other gods, broke all of the commandments, even went into exile for seventy years because of their unfaithfulness. But they’ve actually hit their low point – not because they’ve abandoned God, but because they’ve lost what it means to follow God.

They’ve created their own set of rules they follow, and they believe God owes them His favor because they follow the rules. Never mind that those rules allow the Jewish leaders to commit gross sins themselves, to steal and covet and destroy; they think that as long as they follow their manmade rules, God must bless them. They’ve lost the very nature of what it means to be chosen by God to be His followers. It’s supposed to be about God, not themselves.

Ultimately, the feeding of the 5,000 puts the emphasis back in the right place. Though Jesus provides for the needs of the crowd in the miracle, the miracle isn’t about God providing for them or for us. The miracle is about Jesus – the Son of God establishing a new people and a new promise. The Jewish people had long expected a Messiah who would lead Israel to victory over her enemies, but Jesus, the true Messiah, leads the true Israel to eternal salvation.

Jesus has announced His Kingdom already, but here He proves its power. In the past, God fed His people manna. There was an expectation that the Messiah would do something similar. Yet none of God's prophets had ever provided for the Israelites like God had done during the Exodus. Jesus is fulfilling the prophecies, showing that He is God's Son come to us.

But it's not just Jesus' power to create food and drink. Jesus is creating a new Israel out of those who will follow Him.¹ This Israel isn't based on birthright; it's based on God's promise to Abraham that all nations will be blessed through him. Anyone who would come to Jesus would be included in the Kingdom of God. There are twelve baskets of leftovers collected from the crowds. This number is no accident. The number twelve always represented the fullness of Israel, the twelve tribes from which all Jews descended. Those who would follow Jesus into the wilderness are the new, true Israel.

What does that have to do with us? Everything. Because those of us who are not a part of the physical Israel, those who are not Jews by birth, have a place. Jesus makes that explicit in a few weeks when He feeds the Gentiles in another miracle. But we are included in this new Kingdom. In Romans 11, the apostle Paul describes our place in the Kingdom like a branch grafted into the original vine of salvation. Because the Kingdom is based around turning to Christ as our redeemer from sin, anyone can become a part, regardless of your background, your former actions, anything!

Friends, we become the new Israel. That's inspiring. Because all who believe are now a new people. We belong to the Kingdom of God. We live in a time where it's hard to know what being an American means. Our culture has changed drastically in just the last few years. We aren't sure that who we vote for lines up with what we believe. We argue over patriotism and civil protest and our country's moral fiber. With the presidential candidates we have, no matter who wins, we have no idea what our country will look like when the next election rolls around.

We can choose to get agitated about all that, upset, nervous, worried. Or we can remember that as much as we love who we are and how much we appreciate the wonders of our country, how thankful we are to God for our freedoms, this is not our home. We are foreigners here. The apostle Peter urged us in his first letter to live as aliens and strangers in this world, turning away from the sins that people who feel at home here do.

We belong to a different Kingdom, a Kingdom without end, a Kingdom that is already present among us. We belong to a Kingdom we can be proud of, because our King is always trustworthy, always righteous, always holy, always just, always fair, always merciful and graceful. When we trust Jesus as our Savior and Lord, we have a home now and forever. We are a part of His everlasting people – made up of every tongue and tribe and nation from Earth, brought together by God to be His forever.

We're comforted by Jesus' compassion and inspired by Jesus' Kingdom, but we're also challenged by Jesus' charge. *As disciples, we give whatever we have back to God to accomplish the work He has for us to do.* Jesus didn't just start handing out bread and fish. In fact, He's not the one who had a concern about dinner. The disciples are the ones like, "Uh, Jesus, you gotta send these folks away because it's getting late. If you keep going, nobody's gonna eat."

And Jesus says, “They don’t need to go. You give them something to eat.” In Greek, just like in English, you can say “Give them something to eat” without emphasizing who’s going to do it. But there’s a big “you” in the original language too. **You** give them something to eat. Jesus is placing the responsibility for feeding the crowd on the disciples.

You can sense them scrambling. “Uh, Judas, how much money we got in the treasury? Oh, that little. We’d need eight months wages to buy enough food for everyone? Well, that’s not gonna work. And we don’t have any food either? There’s just a little kid here with food for himself and his brother that he’ll give us? Well, that’s not much. Um, Jesus, here’s the deal...we’ve only got five loaves and two fish. I don’t think we can do what you asked. Sorry.”

The problem is, they focus on the smallness of what they have rather than the blessings of God, which they saw poured out through Jesus day after day. We often think of ancient people as simpleminded, but they were reasonable people who used their minds. Reason told them they couldn’t feed the multitudes. But they needed to trust the power of God right in front of them.ⁱⁱ

And so do we. God has sent us the Holy Spirit. He is just as much present and active in our lives as Jesus was with His disciples. The power to multiply bread and fish – and to change lives and hearts – is available to us through the Holy Spirit. But we are intimidated by what we lack, and we cling to what we have rather than handing it over to be used by God.

How many of us use what we lack as an excuse not to do what God is asking us to do? I pastor a small church with limited funds. I’m a retiree without a big circle of friends. I’m so busy at work I only have a couple free hours. I’m an introvert who has a hard time talking to people. I’m short on cash, short on time, short on talent. And you know what? All that can be true. The disciples had five loaves and two fish. That’s all. No lie. Not enough to do the job.

*But in the hands of Jesus, it became enough. **In the hands of Jesus, it became far more than enough.***

All it takes for us to succeed is to give back to God the resources we’ve got. That can be scary – the disciples weren’t sure they’d get dinner, but they ended up with twelve basketfuls. What is God calling you to give to Him to get His work done? Time? Talents? Funds? Give it, however meager is it, and He will bless it abundantly. Don’t think, “I can’t do it.” Of course you can’t do it! That’s the point! None of us is big enough to do the work of God. But God can do it through us! Give what you have to Him, and He will do His work through you!

Trust Him, and His Kingdom will expand through you. Invite a friend to church! To Bible study! To Meal and a Movie! If you don’t have friends, make ‘em! If you can’t do that, bake something for someone who can! Go down to Military Avenue and fill a bag of groceries! Whatever you have, give it, and God will use it to make His Kingdom expand this very day.

Jesus comforts, inspires, and challenges us through the feeding of the 5,000. If you don’t know Him yet, keep coming. Keep listening. Keep trusting more and more. And feel free to talk to me about it. And if you have given Jesus the keys to your life, give Him everything He asks for. You’ll find yourself blessed as God expands His Kingdom through you.

ⁱ Blomberg, C. (1992). *Matthew* (Vol. 22, p. 233). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

ⁱⁱ Inspired by Lange, J. P., & Schaff, P. (2008). *A commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Matthew* (p. 269). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.