JESUS FEEDS THE FIVE THOUSAND

Matthew 14:13–21

Key Verse: 14:16

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

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” It’s a famous quote taken from the Bible. Cain spoke these words about Abel, his brother. It’s meant to show us how sin has affected us all. Sin makes us uncaring and irresponsible. It starts in how we treat our immediate family, but it taints how we see the rest of humanity, even the whole world. In contrast, in today’s passage we see Jesus who cares, who feels responsible—for a large crowd of people he doesn’t even know. We also see how he trains his disciples. Today we want to focus in this study on what we can learn about Jesus. And we want to get at what’s at the heart of real discipleship training. May God speak to us through his living word today.

Look at verses 12–13a. John the Baptist had just been beheaded by Herod. News of it caused Jesus to withdraw privately to a solitary place. Why? Obviously it was hard news to take, and Jesus was fully human. Before he began his own ministry, Jesus had gone to John to be baptized, to fulfill God’s plan (3:13–15). Jesus also gave the same message John had been giving: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (3:2; 4:17). This message of repentance had landed John in prison (4:12), but Jesus taught people to respect John as the greatest man who ever lived, one who prepared the way for the kingdom, the forerunner of the Messiah (11:7–11). Now, the news that John had been beheaded must have affected Jesus deeply. It was like the loss of one’s closest friend. It also foreshadowed what would eventually happen to Jesus. So he took his disciples by boat to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, where there were no people. He wouldn’t have much more time with his disciples, and he wanted to prepare them for what they should do after he himself was gone.

What happened? Look at verse 13b. These people really wanted to be with Jesus! Usually it’s faster to travel by boat than on foot. But when Jesus landed, these people were already there! They obviously had been carefully watching from the shore where his boat was going and were running on foot to follow it. They were not apathetic and self-satisfied; they were desperate! They didn’t care that he was trying to have some alone time with his disciples. They couldn’t give him any personal space. They couldn’t think beyond their own pressing needs. They were demanding, invasive, rude, and frankly, obnoxious.

They were interrupting Jesus’ plan. But how did he respond to them? Read verse 14. Jesus was so different from most people. When we encounter people and their problems, we tend to be indifferent, or burdened that we have to help them, or even critical. We start thinking, “Why did you let yourselves get into this situation in the first place? Don’t you know how to manage your own life?” But Jesus didn’t see these people like that. Even though he was grieving the loss of his friend John and had a plan to be alone with his disciples, even though these people were invading his private space, Jesus saw them with compassion. It was his gut reaction to people; compassion was in his spiritual DNA. It shows us that Jesus was more than a limited human being; Jesus is God Incarnate. Jesus’ heart of compassion affected how he saw people. People’s problems and needs didn’t wear him out. We saw this earlier in Matthew’s Gospel. 9:36 reads, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” His first response was like a doctor or nurse on a battlefield, inundated with countless wounded and bleeding soldiers, forgetting about himself and caring for them even to the point of fainting.

The question is, how can we be more like Jesus? How can we respond to people the way he did? When we ourselves are exhausted, or hurting, how can we see people with compassion? We can feel so limited, or even burned out. 2 Corinthians 1:3–4 reads, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.” When we experience God’s compassion, we have something to give; we’re renewed with compassion within us to share.

What about Jesus’ disciples? How were they in this situation? Read verse 15. It seems like such a smart solution. Obviously the disciples were being very patient with Jesus. They knew he was trying to be alone with them. They knew these people had invaded their privacy. They knew Jesus couldn’t help himself and had to be compassionate and heal their sick. They watched as he ministered to these people until it was late in the day. Then, as the sun began setting their patience ran out. Their idea seemed like a really good plan. After all, all these people were hungry and needed to get home to eat and rest. They thought they were helping Jesus by reminding him of the time and what the people needed.

But Jesus shocked them. Read verse 16. Jesus was being straight-up unreasonable. How could he be serious? How could *they* give these people something to eat? They were like children saying to their mother, “Mom, cooking is *your* job.” In that remote place there was no food market. It wasn’t 20 or 30 people—but 5,000 men, besides women and children (21). Even if they had enough money, there was no nearby place to go and instantly get that much food. In this situation, how could Jesus say, “You give them something to eat”?

Clearly he was training them. Jesus is like a physical trainer who pushes us to go beyond our limits. People pay for a personal physical trainer, but avoid spiritual training like the plague. It’s so hard to find anyone willing to train us spiritually. Spiritual training may sound vague, but it’s real. The training isn’t just to give us a hard time; God trains us because he loves us. In his love God wants us to grow to be a useful person in doing his work. If we only live by the situation around us, or by our feelings, we’ll be just like the disciples. We’ll stop whenever things get hard. We’ll find smart plans and reasonable excuses so that we can extricate ourselves from all the demands. It’s at the core of our sinful nature to try to save ourselves, and if we’re left alone, that’s exactly how we’ll end up living—saving ourselves first. Of course Jesus understands our hard personal situations. And he knows our limitations. But he doesn’t think these things allow us to be irresponsible. Jesus wants to train us to have a sense of responsibility for others, even when it seems impossible for us to do anything for them.

People have many ideas about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Yes, disciples need to have a deeper commitment than spectators in the crowd. Yes, disciples need deeper instruction in the word of God. But today’s event shows us what’s really at the core of a true disciple. He was training his disciples to learn his compassion for people, and his faith in God to do something for people in an impossible situation. Compassion and faith may seem too basic to us. Isn’t there something deeper Jesus wants us to learn? But having true compassion and true faith is so deep it can take an entire lifetime for us to really learn. And they are the *sine qua non* of a true disciple. Whatever else we may have, without compassion and faith, we can’t be a true disciple of Jesus.

We also learn from this event the nature of compassion. Compassion is more than a feeling. It’s more than getting emotional. Compassion is seeing what people really need, and then, taking their problem as my own and actually doing something about it (cf. 1Jn3:17,18). God doesn’t want us to be indifferent to people, or burdened, or critical, or super clever, but actively compassionate.

How did the disciples respond to Jesus’ words? Read verse 17. Notice they used the word “only.” The five loaves were actually like biscuits, the two fish were small, and there were maybe 10,000 hungry people there. It was way too little to make any difference at all. It wasn’t enough even to feed one of the hungry disciples, let alone all those people in the crowd. What did Jesus say to them? Read verse 18. This is the secret of the miracle. It’s bringing even the small things we do have to Jesus. We don’t produce the miracle; Jesus does. All we need to do is bring what we have to Jesus by faith. This was what was lacking in the disciples’ thinking. They were thinking about the situation and about only the little bit they had. They failed to really think about Jesus. With Jesus, all things are possible. This is probably the most important lesson in this event. Ephesians 3:20 says, “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work among us…” Those are incredible words! If we believe them, what used to look like only five loaves and two fish suddenly becomes a possibility. When we start our thinking with ourselves, we get depressed. But when we start our thinking with Jesus, things start looking brighter and brighter. That’s the power of faith. Jesus wants to train us to have faith in God to attempt the impossible in serving others.

What did Jesus do next? Read verse 19. It’s written in understatement but we learn several important things from Jesus here. First, he created an environment of faith. He directed the people to sit down on the grass. It wasn’t crowd control; he was helping them expect they’d get fed, even though there was no food. Likewise, in tough situations he wants us not to be despairing, grumbling or complaining, but to believe and expect that God will meet all our needs. Second, he prayed. He took the five loaves and two fish, looked up to heaven and gave thanks. He thanked God for what they did have. He was depending on God Almighty to do something, not on himself. He prayed first, before trying to do something. When we pray to God in faith in impossible situations, God is pleased to do great things. Third, he co-worked with his disciples. He didn’t try to do everything by himself; he shared the work with his disciples. Where there is an environment of faith, prayer and co-working, God still can do miracles.

Look at verse 20a. This is the miracle. Jesus was able to meet all their needs. This is the main take-away. People have so many problems, so many needs. At times it can seem overwhelming. But Jesus is able to meet all our needs. He can heal all our spiritual diseases. He alone can satisfy our souls. We tend to try to feed on the things of this world to satisfy us. But these things are like junk food; they leave us unhealthy spiritually, and restless. But when we come to Jesus, our souls are truly satisfied. Yes, we’re complex. We have so many layers of problems and needs. It may seem too simplistic, but if we truly come to Jesus by faith, we find total satisfaction. We become like the psalmist who wrote, “The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake” (Ps23:1–3).

Read verse 20b. It’s another mini-miracle. After all was said and done, there were exactly 12 basketfuls of leftover bread and fish, one for each disciple. It tells us that when we focus on serving God and others, we will experience that God meets all our personal needs as well (Mt6:33). So we don’t need to worry.

Read verse 16 again. People have many needs—around the world, in our country, even on this campus. May God open our hearts to Jesus’ words.