

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

This week’s gospel reading is perhaps the most famous miracle in the Bible: the feeding of the five thousand.

The details are familiar to most: Jesus feeds thousands of people with five loaves of bread and two fish. But what is this miracle really about, and what does it have to do with us today? The disciples, when faced with a very real problem, concluded that the only solution was to send the people away from Christ. We heard read, “¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to Jesus (him) and said, ‘This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.’”

Today we might interpret this, the suggestion that we, the body of Christ, leaves, stays away from church. In fact, many people, when they are faced with challenges or difficulties in life, believe the solution is to stay away from church. “No one at church knows or cares about my problems anyway, so why go?” “We’re struggling financially and I need to pick up more weekend hours or a second job, so church will have to wait.” And so, it is very important that we listen as Jesus explains why worldly troubles should drive us to not away from church; why we don’t need to go away.

Jesus says, “You don’t need to go away,” to anyone who thinks that no one understands, no one can relate, no one cares. Because even if no one else understands or cares, Jesus does. He has compassion.

But don’t make the mistake of thinking that Jesus’ compassion is just like ours. We tend to have compassion only for people we don’t think deserve to suffer. But, if, in our opinion, someone deserves what’s coming to them, we are not so sympathetic. And if I’m not in the mood for being compassionate, because I’m stressed or suffering, don’t look to me for any compassion!

It’s a mistake to think that Jesus is like us, that he feels compassion only for those who deserve it or only when he’s in the mood for it. And that’s here in the text: “When Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place to be alone.” What did Jesus hear that caused him to want to be alone? First, he heard that his cousin, John the Baptist, had been beheaded; and, second, that Herod had taken an alarming interest in him and his ministry, which isn’t good news when he’s just murdered your cousin. You can understand why Jesus would want to be alone with his friends in this situation. He’s a human being just like us. He’s the one in need of understanding and compassion, and yet, when he sees the large crowd, he had compassion for them and healed their sick.

This is real comfort, isn’t it? If, at one of the worst moments of his life on earth, Jesus still had compassion for others, could there be a moment in our lives when Jesus is not overflowing with compassion for us? Do you think he could ever be too busy, too tired, too overwhelmed by his problems to care about yours? Of course not! But we may have doubts. “What if I deserve to suffer? What if I am simply reaping what I’ve sown? What if I’m struggling financially because of my own poor decisions or suffering physically because of a lifetime of unhealthy living? What if my children have fallen from faith because I didn’t set a good enough example? When I don’t even pity myself, how could I expect Jesus to?” But you don’t have to go away, because this miracle shows Jesus has compassion even on sinners who are only getting what they deserve.

Again, we find the proof in the text. Jesus was trying to find some peace and quiet, but the crowds wouldn’t give it to him. They followed him, uninvited, to a deserted place. They didn’t take any food and they stayed too late. So, when they began to get hungry late in the day, they really had only themselves to blame. They fully deserved to spend the night with their stomachs rumbling and listening to their children saying, “I’m hungry.” At least that’s what we may think; that Jesus’ compassion is only for those who deserve it; that he only helps those who help themselves.

But if you have a better understanding of the Gospel, that doesn’t make any sense. What sense would it make for Jesus to come into the world to keep the Law perfectly on our behalf, only to throw us out because we aren’t perfect? How could we possibly think that Jesus willingly suffered unspeakable things to pay for our sins, and now he’s going to abandon us because we’re sinners? One of the key characteristics of God is that he is compassionate, but if he’s only compassionate to those who deserve it, that’s not really compassion.

You don’t need to go away. Jesus has compassion on you, no matter who you are or what you’ve done, and he has the power to satisfy your needs. At the beginning of our text, the sick came to him for healing and Jesus healed them. Maybe you’re not sick. But you can go ahead and fill in your own need. Maybe you’re enduring mental or emotional pain. Maybe you’re facing family problems, marriage problems, job problems. If you have nothing but problems in front of you, look at what Jesus does here! He addresses one of the most basic human needs: the need for food. Jesus fed 5,000 men plus women and children. If there was a woman for every man and say two children per couple, that’s 20,000 people. Jesus fed 20,000 with maybe 5 pounds of bread and 2 pounds of fish. Jesus’ power to provide is clear.

You don’t need to go away. Jesus is here, and he has the compassion and the power to address both your physical and spiritual needs. But let’s be honest: your spiritual needs are the most important. That’s clear in this miracle, too, when we compare the parallel accounts. Luke tells us that before Jesus healed and fed the people, he spoke to them about the kingdom of God. The whole reason the crowds were out there in the wilderness so late in the day was that Jesus was preaching a long sermon to them to take care of their primary need, their spiritual need; to tell them that he had come to pay for their sins. And then, only after he had addressed their spiritual needs, did he address their physical need for food. Many churches get this backwards. They figure that if they take care of people’s felt, physical needs, for food, money, shelter, daycare, whatever, they will keep coming to have their spiritual needs satisfied. It didn’t even work that way for Jesus. John tells us that after Jesus fed this crowd, they tried to take him by force and make him their king. Jesus said that his teachings were not all about the body: “⁶³ It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴ But among you there are some who do not believe.’ ... ⁶⁵ And he said, ‘For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.’

But when Jesus insisted that he came to be their Saviour from sin, the bread of life, many turned away from him (John 6:63-66).

The lesson being: don’t go away from church because you don’t think it is doing enough for your physical needs. You don’t need to go away, and you shouldn’t go away because here is where Jesus takes care of your most important needs. Here is forgiveness to address the guilt that weighs on your conscience. Here is life to address the death you feel at work in your body. Here is the power and courage to face the fear and division so evident in our world today.

And Jesus does it through Word and Sacrament. Early Christians adopted bread and fish as a symbol for Holy Communion. They understood that in this Sacrament, Jesus provides for both spiritual and physical needs. St Ignatius of Antioch, around 110 AD, described the Eucharist as the "medicine of immortality," because it not only cleanses the soul of sin, but is heavenly food which grants and guarantees the resurrection of the body. Jesus makes it clear that he provides for our whole person: body and soul.

Lastly, we’ve looked at this miracle from the point of view of the crowd, but what about from the perspective of the disciples. Jesus was doing two things in this miracle; he was providing for the needs of the crowd; but he was also testing his disciples’ faith, to see if they really believed that he was the Son of God who is able to satisfy every need. And the disciples fail. The only thing they do right, is to obey Jesus when he tells them to distribute the food to the people. They fail continually, and yet Jesus still feeds them, and after it’s over gives them each a basket of leftovers. It’s a small sign that he will provide far more than they need, even when they don’t deserve it.

So don’t despair over how many times you’ve failed to trust that Jesus has both the power and the compassion to provide for us spiritually and physically. This miracle proves that he will provide even when we don’t deserve it. And that’s why no matter what troubles you are facing right now, you don’t need to go away.
AMEN

Credit (parts): Risen Saviour Lutheran