

Understanding Jesus

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August 13, 2006
John 6:1-21

This morning's gospel begins by telling us that "*Jesus went to the other side of the sea of [Galilee]...up the mountain [to] sit there with his disciples.*" It was Jesus' practice, from time to time, to back off from the crowds and controversy surrounding him to rest, regroup, reflect and pray alone or with his disciples. The times were tense, his life was in danger, the crowds kept seeking him out and before long he would enter Jerusalem for a week that began with adulation but ending with his death. What he very much needed now was a break from the intensity, to be alone and to spend some time with his friends.

The Sea of Galilee was a somewhat oval-shaped body of water about five miles across at its largest part. Bethsaida, Capernaum and Tiberias were located on its shores. So was the city of Magdala—the town from which the disciple Mary came. Near the northern end of the sea the Jordan River flows surrounded by lush plains where grass grew plentifully all year round. Behind those plains stood a large hill or small mountain, however you want to call it. It was there, on the opposite side of the sea from where Jesus had been teaching, that he and his disciples tried to retreat in isolation. But it wasn't to be.

The very crowd he left behind walked the nine miles around the circumference of the sea and gathered themselves on the grassy plain at the bottom of that little mountain. Did they come because of Jesus' healing power? Did they make the tiring journey to hear the Words of Life that he offered? Were they obsessively curious? Or had they come as doubters seeking or exploit any theological vulnerability in his actions or words? Probably different people came for different reasons. But they came, and not in small numbers either—about 5,000 we are told.

This happened many times to Jesus, and he would always respond the same way—with compassion. I wish just once Jesus would have said, “Get these people out of here”! But he didn’t. He knew they needed him, to drink of his living words, to feel his healing touch. But he also knew they were physically tired and hungry.

Philip came from Galilee, so it was natural for Jesus to turn to Philip when he saw the huge throng at the base of the mountain. He asked Philip, “*Where are we going to buy bread for them to eat.*” Philip’s answer reminds me of the response that Scotty, the engineer of the Enterprise, always gave Star Trek’s Captain Kirk when Kirk would ask Scotty to perform some improbably engineering feat: “Captain, that’s impossible; I can’t change the laws of physics.” Seemingly astonished by Jesus’ request, Philip replied that “*six month’s wages could not buy enough bread for everyone to even get a little.*” Perhaps put another way, “Jesus, that’s impossible; I can’t change the laws of economics.” But, of course, Jesus could and did, any maybe the laws of physics, too. Andrew, overhearing Jesus’ request of Philip, came to the rescue by bringing forth a boy with five barley loaves and two fish, but even Andrew had his doubts: “*What are these among so many people.*”

It’s important to understand something about these loaves and fish. Barley bread was the cheapest of all bread. You wouldn’t find it in some gourmet Galilean bakery or on the dining table of your average Pharisee. Barley bread was the bread of the poor, cruder and less tasty than other breads, but cheaper and thus the bread of no choice for the poor. And there were no ten-pound bass to be caught in the Sea of Galilee, just small sardine-size fish that had to be pickled if you weren’t going to eat them right away. In no one’s eyes, except Jesus’, were these five barley loaves and two fish the beginnings of a satisfying meal for 5,000.

After Jesus blessed this boy’s meager offering and turned it into a fully filling meal for everyone present, with twelve baskets of bread left over no less, the people began to recognize that something significant had just taken place, a sign from a prophet. And they tried to take him by force, John’s account tells us, and make him king. But wanting nothing of the sort, Jesus

took off back up the mountain, this time successfully isolating himself, at least for a while.

Mark's gospel relates another similar occasion. This time about 4,000 people followed him for three days, once again listening to his word and receiving his healing. As he was about to send those assembled on their way, he decided to feed them so that they wouldn't faint on their way home. This time seven loaves and a few fish were found and he turned them into a filling meal for all with seven loaves left over. Mark then records two important follow-up conversations.

The first is with a group of Pharisees who test him by saying they want him to give them a sign from heaven. Frustrated with their lack of sincerity, Jesus told them in effect that there were signs all around and because you cannot see them, I'm not going to give you one.

Leaving the Pharisees, he and the disciples secured a boat and launched it to travel to their next destination. On the way, Jesus, noticing that they had brought along with them a loaf of bread, pointed to the bread and said to his disciples, "*Watch out—beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.*" Jesus is obviously very focused on his conversation with the Pharisees, their insincerity and deception, and tried to warn the disciples, "Watch out—beware of these people"! The disciples seem to be more focused on the trip ahead and the bread they brought along. They sort of scratched their heads at Jesus' sharp words of warning, looked at each other and wondered, "*I guess he said that because we don't have enough bread.*"

I think something of great importance was happening here within Jesus, something about the core of his identity and the disciples' failure to grasp who he was. "*Why are you talking about bread?*" he asked, not hiding his frustration. "*Don't you understand? Can't you see? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes and fail to see? Do you have ears to hear and fail to hear? Don't you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?*" "Twelve," they replied. "*And the seven for the four thousand, how many*

baskets full of left-overs did you collect?" And they said to him, *"Seven."* Then Jesus pleaded with them, *"Do you not yet understand"?*

You can just feel that something terribly important is going on here for Jesus, exasperating him, frustrating him, maybe even a hint of despair. He doesn't expect the Pharisees to understand. Signs are all around for them to see, but they are blind. But his own disciples who are with him every day, who hear and see all that he says and does, why are they talking about food? Can't they see what's going on here? Don't they know who I am? Don't they understand? Don't they know anything about me?

During the summer between my fifth and sixth grade, I had my first experience of romantic attraction. Janet lived a few blocks away and was good friends with my cousin, Patty Ann, who lived next door to me. All three of us were in the same school class. Janet came over to Patty Ann's house nearly every day that summer and I somehow often found myself drifting down to Patty Ann's house, too. Sometimes Patty Ann would leave us alone and Janet and I would talk and laugh together and sit very close to each other with hands or arms or legs brushing up against each other.

Well, things didn't go far beyond that during the summer or the following year, but we did spend time together and there was clearly something mutually attractive going on for us. All that changed in the seventh grade when we began middle school, or junior high as we called it back then. The boys in the Eighth Grade were bigger and stronger than me and they sure seemed to take a liking to Janet, I was sorry to see. And she sure seemed to enjoy that, I was even sorrier to see. I seemed to be left in the dust and as the fall progressed, Janet and I didn't even talk together anymore.

Then one day on the school bus home, I was sitting in the back seat, as I usually did. Janet was sitting a few seats in front of me. When the bus arrived at her stop, she got up from her seat, took one step toward the door and then twirled around with anger on her face and fire in her eyes, looking straight at me. Without a moment's hesitation, she shouted, none too softly: "Joe, you don't know anything about girls"! She then spun around again and

stomped off the bus. With every eye on the bus staring back at me along with many snickers, I slowly slid as far down into my seat as I could. The sixty-seconds to my bus stop seemed like forever. That afternoon as I thought about what she said, I had to agree with her. I didn't know anything about girls.

In a very different way, but maybe on one level a very similar way, too, Jesus said the same thing to his disciples: "You don't know anything about me"! Don't these two miraculous feedings reveal anything to you about who I am? Don't you get it? When Jesus performed these miracles, the Pharisees sought a larger or clearer sign, but were too blind to see what was already before their eyes. The crowds saw and understood that something powerful was going on within Jesus, but interpreted it as a kind of worldly power and wanted to make him king. But the very people closest to Jesus, who should have been able to understand, could only think about food.

I probably would not have gotten it either. Maybe it's a personality thing because I understand best when something is spelled out before me clearly and concretely rather than in image or hidden meaning. Perhaps it has to do with spiritual maturity. Spiritual mystery, for me, seems to reveal itself slowly over time rather than with a bang, giving up its secret little by little as my spiritual maturity deepens bit by bit. I don't think I would have gotten Jesus any more quickly than the disciples did then, maybe more slowly. With that limiting caveat, I want to briefly suggest two ways in which the feeding of the multitude stories and understanding Jesus connect for me.

The first is this: That an undying compassion for human suffering lies at the heart of who Jesus is and who Jesus wants us to be. In several gospel accounts the feeding stories begin by saying that Jesus had compassion on the multitudes. The Greek word for "compassion" means, literally, having one's guts torn apart. That's no soft, liberal bleeding heart. That's a heart laid bare to human need. That's a heart that allows pain to be felt deep within. To really understand Jesus, the way he wants to be understood, to

have spiritual eyes and ears that can see and hear is to have an undying compassion for human suffering the way Jesus did.

The second is this: That the kingdom of God, breaking through into this world in the most radical of ways, is at the center of understanding Jesus and why he came. Ched Myers in "Binding the Strong Man," argues that the crux of the feeding stories lies in the exchange between Jesus and his disciples over how to feed the people. The disciples think in terms of normal political/economic solutions, Myers maintains. Somehow they need to find enough money, go buy some bread, bring it back and feed the people. But Jesus sees a new way unhampered by normal channels. The kingdom of God, brought by and embodied by Jesus, will break through and confront all established economic, political, cultural and religious ways of doing things. To really understand Jesus, to beware of the yeast of the scribes and Pharisees, is to know that the kingdom breaks through and judges and calls into question all economic and political and cultural and religious assumptions, and not just those of others out there, but ours, too.

I have no doubt that there is more to understanding Jesus than I know so far, and many of you may be ahead of me. But what I want to leave with you today is this: that you hear the same voice of Jesus to you, as to the disciples so long ago, the same impassioned plea to understand Jesus, to know him, to perceive in your heart the deepest things about who he is and who he wants you to be and then to let that plea be your guide to growing faithfulness and deepening conversion.