

My wife and I are the same age, and so a few years ago when we turned 40, we took a trip to Africa to celebrate. We started in Rwanda, where I was teaching a theology course, but afterwards we had a week in Tanzania on safari.

There were lots of highlights, but one of my favorite moments was a place we stayed in the Serengeti. All day long we had been following the wildebeest migration, and we'd been to the hippo pools, and we'd seen a cheetah dragging its kill up into a tree. But at the end of the day, we turned up a side road and drove into this wooded area. There were elephants and buffalo and giraffe, and all of a sudden, there was our camp also. No fences, just a row of luxury tents with masai warriors standing outside on guard.

When we arrived, there was actually a giraffe right behind our tent, eating leaves from a tree! They gave us a walkie talkie and said to call when we wanted to go to dinner, and one of the masai would come fetch us. We asked why. Because there are lions just over the hill, and we wouldn't want anything to happen to you...

It was one of the best experiences of my life – something I'd always dreamed about. And to top it off, the food was excellent. I don't know how they managed to do it in a camp that moved every couple of weeks as they followed the migration. It was this amazing wilderness experience.

Our Bible passage today is all about an amazing wilderness experience, and an unforgettable meal. So why don't we pray that God would speak to us now as we open his word.

Our heavenly Father, as we look at this familiar story today, please reveal to us hidden treasures and deep understanding of who Jesus is. Speak to us now, we ask, in Jesus' name. Amen

Well we are in the middle of our sermon series from Matthew 13-16, a series we are calling Hidden Treasures. These chapters are all about going beyond surface impressions of Jesus, and uncovering the truth about who he was, and who he is, and what that means for us. Every story is a bit like a piece of a puzzle, revealing more and more of the full picture.

So that's the plan today – we're going to look at this familiar story and try to go beyond the surface.

And today's story is possibly the best-known miracle of Jesus. It's the only one recorded in all four gospels, so it must have made a big impression on the original writers. It's the feeding of the 5000.

1. Character of Jesus: Compassion

In the story so far, great crowds had been following Jesus as he spoke about the kingdom of God, and performed miracles that showed the power of God.

But not everybody loved Jesus: our passage today starts with Jesus hearing the disturbing news that his cousin John had been put to death by the local governor. John had been beheaded and his head was brought to the governor on a platter in the middle of a dinner party. It's a grotesque image on its own. But for Jesus, it must have been doubly disturbing, because John was killed because of his association with Jesus.

And so in Matt 14:13 Jesus gets in a boat to get away from the crowds for a bit. He heads to a solitary place (perhaps hoping to pray? rest? time with disciples?)

But Jesus never got the alone time he was seeking. The crowds saw him get on the boat, and they followed on foot, so that when the boat landed there was already a large crowd gathered.

And Jesus v14 looks at this large crowd with all their needs, all their sicknesses, all their brokenness. And his heart goes out to them. It says in v14: He had **compassion** on them. In the original language the word used for compassion means a visceral reaction, like something you feel deep down inside. Jesus is exhausted, probably emotionally spent, but his gut reaction to the crowds is to do what he can to mend their brokenness.

¹⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. (Matthew 14:14)

So this is the first big idea I want you to take away from the feeding of the 5000. Because we learn something about the character of Jesus. **Jesus is full of compassion.**

Matthew had used the exact same phrase about Jesus back in chapter 9:

³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had **compassion** on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matthew 9:36)

As a man, Jesus is shown to be loving and compassionate. He puts his own needs to the side, and ministers to those around him first. Jesus is the opposite of selfish – he deliberately focuses on others, even at the expense of his own rest.

And if Jesus were just a man, his compassion would be an admirable character trait.

But when we hear the word compassion, and when Matthew repeats it in these key moments, it actually gives a clue to the deeper source of Jesus' compassion. And a clue to Jesus' deeper identity.

Because when we hear the word compassion, we're meant to think back to Exodus 34:6, when God revealed his glory to Moses.

Exodus is the book of the Old Testament where God rescues his people from slavery in Egypt. And God was present with his people in dramatic and visible ways – in a pillar of fire and a pillar of cloud, fighting their battles and leading them through the Red Sea by separating the waters in front of them. God did amazing things amongst his people, and yet when they found themselves in the desert, in the wilderness, and they started to grumble and they started to doubt God's goodness.

And Moses, the leader of God's people, started to doubt that the people would listen to him.

And so God did something for Moses that would dispel all doubts – he showed himself to Moses. Well, not all of him, because God says that no one can see his face and live (Exodus 33:20).

So God hides Moses in the cleft of a rock, and then he appears in all his glory. It makes me think of Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark – when the baddies open the ark and their faces melt off. That's why Moses had to be hidden in the cleft.

But listen to what the LORD said about himself:

*And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the **compassionate** and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness... (Exodus 34:6)*

Compassion. At the heart of God's character is a deep and abiding compassion. A visceral instinct that longs to heal our wounds, that longs to care for us and to love us. A character that is slow to anger and full of grace. A character that abounds in love.

I think that's why Matthew uses the same word to describe Jesus. He's trying to tell us what he has learned about the secret identity of Jesus.

Matthew is revealing that Jesus shares the same character as the Lord, the same compassion that is at the very heart of God's identity.

So that's the first big idea from our passage – **Jesus shares the same character as God.**

2. Actions of Jesus: Provision

Now that wouldn't be remarkable on its own. We could just say that Jesus was a very good person, and a devout student of God's ways.

But the second big idea to take away from our passage is that **Jesus shares the same actions as God**, and those actions reveal something about his identity.

So let's read the next part of the story.

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 14:15-21)

This was a big crowd – 5000 men, we read in v21, not counting women and children. That means there were possibly 15,000 – 20,000 people there.

And of course, the disciples don't have food for that many.

But Jesus takes the five loaves and the two fish and somehow there is enough for everyone to eat until they are satisfied. There are even leftovers – one basket for each of the disciples, probably. Maybe a reminder that they shouldn't doubt Jesus.

If you ever went to Sunday School, you probably learned this story. And what was the lesson you learned?

Jesus can do amazing things? Jesus saves the day? They're both true, but this miracle reveals something deeper than merely Jesus' ability to feed a crowd.

And to help us, we have to delve back into the Old Testament, because the Old Testament has a number of feeding miracles.

- Like the prophet Elijah who was fed by ravens who brought him food. That was at God's direction (1 Kings 17).

- In the same chapter, God fed Elijah and a widow and her son with just a little bit of flour and oil – no matter how much they used up, there was always a little bit left over.
- The prophet Elisha saw a similar miracle with oil that didn't run out (2 Kings 4)
- And then Elisha fed 100 men with 20 loaves, and there was some left over... (also 2 Ki 4)

God has a history of feeding his people in miraculous ways.

But there's a clue in Matthew's story that points to perhaps the greatest feeding miracle in the Old Testament...

And it's this: Matthew carefully describes this event as happening in a 'solitary place' (v13) or a 'remote place' (v15) – they're both the same phrase in the original language meaning 'the wilderness'.

Matthew wants us to think of God's people in the wilderness, when Moses and the Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years after the Exodus. And throughout that time, how did God feed his people? He fed them with manna, bread from heaven, that they collected each day. And there was always enough...

Here we have Jesus in the wilderness, looking up to heaven, breaking bread, and there is enough for everyone. Can you see what Jesus was doing?

Jesus was providing for his people, just as God had done through Moses so long ago. And so some people thought of Jesus as a new Moses, or a new Elijah, or a new prophet.

But there was a difference Jesus and the other prophets. And this is the hidden treasure in this story, I think.

All those other prophets, they provided bread. But listen to what Jesus says about himself in John's gospel:

"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. (John 6:35)

The other prophets provided bread, but Jesus *is* the bread. Jesus himself is the way that God nourishes his people. Jesus provides and sustains and feeds people in and of himself. And clearly not just in a physical way, but in a way that means our deepest hungers and thirsts will be satisfied.

It's an intriguing idea, and for some of the people listening to Jesus that day, it was a step too far. Eating his flesh and drinking his blood? Jesus was speaking symbolically, and it's a symbol we still share in today.

In a little while we are going to take Communion, where we eat bread and drink wine in remembrance of the way that Jesus' body was broken for us and his blood was poured out for the forgiveness of sins. But that all comes back to this idea that Jesus is the bread of life. And by feeding on him, by believing in him, by trusting in his sacrifice on our behalf, we are nourished spiritually, we are filled up with promises that God loves us, and graciously forgives our sins. Just like the best meals around the family table, this symbolic meal is meant to remind you that you belong, that you are home, that you are loved.

So I hope you'll come to Jesus' table – he loved to eat with all kinds of people. Not just those who had their lives together, but with people who needed healing. Because Jesus is compassionate. And he heals our wounds. He fills the void that so many of us try to fill with other things – with substances like alcohol or medication, with sex, or spending, or whatever your drug of choice is. Jesus knows what you need, and he wants you to come to him and be satisfied. Come to him and your deepest needs will be filled.

3. Method of Jesus: Multiplication

And that brings us to our last big idea from the passage which is this: Jesus teaches us a lesson about how God provides for his people.

I want to come back to what Jesus said to the disciples when they suggested sending the crowd away...

Do you remember the disciples had said (v15):

“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.”
(Matthew 14:15-16)

It's a curious statement, isn't it? It's obvious that the disciples can't feed a crowd that large. In Mark's account, the disciples say it would cost half a year's wages to feed that many people, if they even had that much money with them, which is unlikely.

So why does Jesus say, “You give them something to eat.”?

I think Jesus wants them to learn a kingdom principle – that God can take even the smallest of gifts, and multiply it so that its impact is increased.

Think of the loaves and the fishes – the disciples looked down at this pitiful amount of food and thought that it could never be enough to feed such a large crowd. But Jesus took what the disciples had, and multiplied it so that everyone there was fed.

Jesus does the same with the disciples themselves. Do you remember at the start of this chapter, Jesus was tired. He needed some alone time to process the death of his cousin. But the crowds followed him and he never got his rest. Jesus' impact was limited by the fact that there was just one of him. For 3 years he traveled and taught and healed basically within the confines of one small country.

But when he died, and the disciples took the gospel out in different directions, that's when the church started multiplying, wasn't it. Jesus takes this ragtag group of 12 men – fishermen, a tax collector, Jesus' brother – and he sends them out and the church was born.

And those disciples made disciples, and those disciples made more disciples. And the impact of one man was multiplied so that there are now something like 2.5 billion Christians alive today.

See, God can take the smallest of gifts, and multiply it so that its impact is increased. You might look at the gifts God has given you, and say, what impact can I make? What I have to offer is pitiful in light of all needs that are out there.

When you start to think that way, remember the loaves and the fishes. Jesus can do amazing things when we surrender what we have in his service.

It might be praying. It might be giving financially. It might be serving in the church. It might be using your gifts to make a difference in the community. They are all ways that God uses **each one of us** to impact the world for Christ.

But it all starts with believing that God can do what is impossible for us to do on our own...

Will you pray with me?