

As a fan of professional football, one of the more interesting stories to come out of this pandemic has been the agreement that the NFL recently reached with their players to try and put together a season this Fall. It has not been easy, as you might imagine. Lots of concern over sanitation, personal protection equipment, and near constant testing.

But some players still weren't comfortable with this plan. So they also included an option for players to simply sit-out the season altogether. They'll be paid a relatively small stipend. Their contracts will essentially be put on hold. And then, hopefully, they'll return to play again in 2021.

Several players have already chosen to take this course of action. And what's really interesting to me is the reasons why they have done so. One player has a mother who was recently diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. He wants to stay by her side and he doesn't want to risk infecting her. Similarly, another has a wife who's pregnant. He wants to see her. He wants to see his newborn. And so, he is walking away from football for the year.

One of the more impressive stories hits very close to home. Kansas City Chief's offensive lineman Laurent Duvernay-Tardif is the only player in NFL history to have completed med school. He is opting out so that he can continue working on the front lines of the pandemic at a long-term care facility in his home town of Montreal.

These players love football. They have devoted their lives to playing football. They are paid millions of dollars to play football. But they have each looked at their lives and determined that there is something more important to them than football. That there are people more important to them that they need to stay close to. People that are more valuable to them than anything else in their lives.

I think we can all relate to that. There are people in our own lives who are immensely important to us. People we value more than friends or money or careers. People we stick close to no matter the cost. And so I think we can also relate to the people in our Gospel lesson. Because it is filled with people who just want to stick by the person they value most.

Oh, I'm not talking about the disciples here. The disciples were, frankly, oblivious and thickheaded about the whole thing. As they often were.

No, the people I'm looking at are the crowds coming to see Jesus. And to understand them, I think the first question we must answer is, "Why are they coming to Jesus?" Initially, at least, why are they there? Why have they chased Jesus down like this?

He's mourning the loss of his cousin and friend and one of the greatest prophets the world has ever known: John the Baptist, who has just been beheaded prior to this incident. Why are these crowds pursuing Jesus in his hour of grief?

Well, our text gives us a clue based on what Jesus' first reaction is. He heals them. These are people in need of healing. These are their friends and family helping them to find their way to Jesus. These are people who are desperate for a miracle. And they are hoping to find one in this man whom everyone is calling "the Christ." The one anointed by God.

And so Jesus heals them. And yet, the crowds don't get smaller. In fact, if anything, they only grow as time goes on. More and more people. Filling the area.

Which makes no sense. Eventually, the number should drop. Eventually, Jesus should run out of people to heal. This is not Jerusalem after all. This is a remote location on the Sea of Galilee. A place the crowd had had to travel long distances to get to.

There's no food out here. There's no shelter. There's nothing. This is a desolate place, Matthew says. The middle of the wilderness. Why are there so many people?

There's really only one explanation. After they were healed, they didn't leave. All these people. Sick. Injured. Paralyzed. Blind. Deaf. Demon possessed. All of them were healed. All of them had their lives back. They could do whatever they wanted without any affliction hindering them. See any person they wanted to see, possibly for the first time in their lives.

And they chose to stay right there with Jesus. They chose to stay right there with the one who had healed them. With the one whose words and actions held more value for them than anything or anyone else in their lives.

But eventually the day gets late. The disciples are tired. The people are hungry. The logical thing to do is send them all home to find their own dinner. But Jesus isn't going to abandon them now. Not after he's done so much to heal them.

So he tells the disciples, "Go feed the people." And the disciples laugh at him. Because there's 5000 men here, plus women and children. Probably over 10,000 people total. And they've got five loaves of bread and two fish. Enough dinner for the 12 disciple, if they stretch it.

But, of course, Jesus has something special in mind. A meal with his personal blessing. A meal that satisfies every hungry person there. A meal that feeds thousands. One more gift from this man who had already given them so much.

The crowds stayed by Jesus because of how much they valued him. But Jesus stayed with the crowds because of how much he valued them. Even in the midst of grief and fatigue, he had compassion on them. He refused to send them away. He refused to leave them.

Because that was why he was there. He didn't come to earth to heal people and then send them away. He didn't gather his sheep like a shepherd only to send them right back to the wolves. As Isaiah had prophesied, Jesus was there to stay by their side and feed them food without price.

And he continued to do that day after day. Not just with bread and fish, but with his Word. With his parables. With his harsh condemnation and with his gracious words of forgiveness.

He continued to do that every day until they hung him on a cross. Until they executed him, just like they had executed his cousin, John the Baptist, before him. And I'm sure there were those in the crowds who looked upon him dead on the cross and thought, "He was just another prophet. Just another teacher who couldn't save his own skin. We were fools to call him the Christ."

How wrong they were. For the one who valued us so much that he would die on the cross for us also values us so much that he would promise to be with us always, to the end of the age.

A promise he kept by giving us a meal. Not bread and fish this time. No, a meal of bread and wine. A meal of his Body and Blood, given for the forgiveness of all our sins.

Look at those elements on the altar. Not much bigger than five loaves and two fish would be, if you piled them up there. And yet, more than enough to satisfy the spiritual hunger of every person here. More than enough to sustain us in the desolate, world of sin and grief in which we live.

More than enough to know that our Lord is still with us. Still healing the wounded soul and the suffering spirit. Still offering us food with his personal blessing. Still staying close to those he values most.

Out of desperation for healing, we gather around Jesus. Out of gratitude and a constant hunger for his Word, we stay by his side. But out of compassion, faithfulness, and steadfast love does our God stay close to us. And feed us a meal without price. So that our souls may live. And we will be satisfied forevermore. Amen.