

There are people in our lives who are immensely important to us. People we value more than money or careers or prestige. People we stick close to no matter the cost.

My wife and I were just discussing that fact recently. Pretty much all of the traveling we've done as adults has been done together, with two sets of eyes on everything and two brains to consider every decision. Traveling to Phoenix was a really nerve wracking experience for me, not because flying on a plane or getting around an unfamiliar city was new for me. But because I was doing it alone. Without my other half to check my work.

My wife and I have reached a point where we just can't function very well without the other one right beside us. We love each other. We trust each other. We need each other nearby. We are one flesh.

That happens in marriage, of course. But it can happen in other relationships too. A best friend you go to for encouragement. A parent you go to for advice. Even a coworker you trust to always have your back. And so I think we can also relate to the people in our Gospel lesson. Because this passage is filled with people who just want to stick by the person they value most.

You might think I'm not talking about the disciples here, sticking by Jesus, their rabbi. But, no, I'm not. 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?

Because Matthew makes it clear that Jesus is not out here encouraging the crowds to come find him. Quite the opposite. He's trying to get away. Trying to find a desolate place to be alone. He's very pointedly trying to get away from the crowds.

Why? Well, because Jesus is grieving. He's mourning the loss of his cousin and friend and one of the greatest prophets the world has ever known: John the Baptist. You see, the passage just before this one is the account of John being beheaded by Herod. And Matthew specifically points to this event as the cause for Jesus' sudden withdrawal from the public.

Which is something I think we can completely understand. Most of us, I think, would want to do the same if a close friend and family member had died. And I'm sure the crowds knew about John's murder. So why are these crowds pursuing Jesus so persistently in his hour of grief?

Well, our text gives us a clue based on what Jesus' first action 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 isn't Jerusalem after all. This is a remote location on the Sea of Galilee. A place Jesus had gone to specifically because it was far from the public. 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. 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 5,000 men here, plus women and children. Probably over 10,000 people total. And they've got five loaves of bread and two fish. Maybe enough for the Jesus and the 12 disciples to have dinner, 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.

I said before that my wife and I can't function anymore without the other one. Our love and trust and need for each other is just too great. Well, there's a reason why the Bible so often describes the relationship between Christ and His Church as a marriage. Because the Church is exactly the same way. We need our Lord with us.

We need His Word. We need His Sacrament. We simply can't function without His presence. Those thousands of men and women and children whom Jesus fed in our Gospel reading were the very first Christian church, in a way. A group of people drawn to Christ who simply couldn't stand the thought of leaving him because he had healed them. We are the same. A group of people drawn to Christ who simply can't stand the thought of being without him because he has healed us.

And so we commune with him this day. And we are fed a meal without price. So that our souls may live. And we will be satisfied forevermore. Amen.