

1. We've all had bad days, days when we receive some unsettling news and the rest of the day simply goes downhill after that. I don't know about you, but when that happens to me, I just want to be by myself. I need time to think things through.

Well, today's gospel passage started out as a very bad day for Jesus; in the morning, he heard the heart-breaking news of John the Baptist's death—the murder of his cousin--his compatriot and friend--by the monster Herod and his conniving wife, Herodias.

And so it was only natural that Jesus wanted to be alone, perhaps feeling some guilt for his cousin's death, but certainly feeling a sense of loss at the demise of his partner in trying to awaken the Jewish people to the reality of the Kingdom of God.

Of course, the apostles too were disturbed by John's death and what that meant for them and their ministry and their own personal futures.

And so as a community, they try to get a little time for themselves, away from the demands of the crowds.

Perhaps now would be a good time for us to reflect upon how many occasions in all 4 gospels that Jesus wished to be alone with his disciples or with his heavenly Father and to realize that if Jesus needed time to try to figure things out, then how much more do we need quite moments when we are broadsided with news or an event that rocks our lives.

After all, there is a reason that God designed the Sabbath to be a day of rest. It's true: people need rest. We need rest.

But now as we return to the gospel, we see that the crowds didn't take this hint of Jesus and the apostle's disappearance as they went looking for them—they just kept coming.

2. And so to recap Jesus' day thus far: He awoke to the devastating news of John's death; he withdrew to a solitary place for refreshment and reflection; he then taught the crowds and healed those who sought him out.

But still, he wasn't finished. Even though the sun was starting to set, Jesus had much more to do before he could sleep.

As we reflect upon the feeding of the 5000 men, we should note that it is the only miracle recorded in all 4 gospels: 2 times in Matthew, 2 times in Mark and 1 time in both Luke and John. And because of this, the Church has always given great significance to the feeding of the 5000 men. Actually, since this miracle took place shortly before Passover and many families would have been on the move to Jerusalem, the actual number was probably more likely to be 20,000 or more who were fed. And this fact can't help but being impressive, then and now.

Matthew's account depicts Jesus as the compassionate King who provided for his subjects.

Mark emphasizes an exhausted Jesus who despite his fatigue, serves those around him who are suffering.

Luke's bear-bones account gives us the feel of a very human Jesus presiding over a very human family meal.

And John quotes Jesus as applying God's unique name to himself when he declares: I am the Bread of Life. And so when we harmonize these 4 accounts, 5 stunning revelations about the character of Jesus and the nature of the miracles emerge.

First, Jesus was a man of compassion. He saw people as shepherd less sheep. And despite the fact that his world had just been rocked by the loss of his cousin, Jesus focused on the needs of the people by teaching them, healing them, and providing food for them.

Second, Jesus was ever on the look out for a "teachable" moment. John says that Jesus lifted up his eyes and seeing a great multitude coming towards him, he said to Phillip: Where shall we buy bread that these may eat? The master-teacher set up an impossible scenario by asking the question, which forced the disciples to face the impossibility of the situation, leading them to a point of curious despair, and finally setting the scene for this most impressive miracle.

Third, Jesus performed an undeniable miracle that marked him as infinitely more than the son of Mary. Jesus is the Son of God and all this was done before an impressively large crowd.

Fourth, Jesus involved his followers in meeting the needs of the people. Jesus could have turned stones into bread, but instead, he chose to use only that which was freely provided to him—a small boy's lunch.

And fifth, Jesus did with the loaves and fishes what he often does with our lives: he blessed and broke them.

Even though the five loaves and two fishes were totally inadequate to feed this great throng, Jesus took that which was offered, blessed it, broke it and shared it.

And so he created food on the spot, something only God can do.

When we offer our lives to him, Jesus must often break us of--our pride, selfishness, insensitivity, self-sufficiency, abrasiveness—those blind spots of our character that limit God's ability to use us to our full potential.

The good news is that we come out from the breaking process a better people.

The bad news is that God often allows pain to produce the breaking.

3. The meal wasn't a total success, however. John adds an epilogue to this miracle in his gospel—he says that from that time on, many of his disciples went back and walked with him no more.

You see, some people followed Jesus only because of the healing he performed. Others sought freedom from the oppression of Rome and viewed Jesus as a king of convenience rather than a king who commanded their spiritual lives.

A third group saw Jesus as the embodiment of a meals-on-wheels program, providing free food, but once Jesus pointed out who he was, why he came to save people eternally rather than politically, and what the cost of following him would be, they abandoned him in droves.

I guess it is true: no good deed goes unpunished. Perhaps we are now tempted to ask: how does this miracle relate to us?

Let me propose an interesting alternative rendition that has greater personal implications as to how we are to live our daily lives.

There is a crowd; it is late; and they are hungry. But was it really likely that the vast majority of these people would hike around the lake without taking any food at all? After all, there were no 7-11s on each block. Would these practical peasants not take something with them to eat, however little?

Now it was evening and they were hungry. But they were also selfish. And they would not produce what they had hidden away in case they would be embarrassed into sharing what they had and then that might leave them without enough to fill their own stomachs.

But now this is where the story reaches out to us. Jesus took the lead by sharing the provisions that they received from the boy. Then he had his Apostles begin to share the fish and bread with a blessing and an invitation and a smile. And thereupon all began to share their hidden provisions and before they knew what was happening, there was enough and more than enough food for all to have their fill.

If this is what happened, it should not be called the miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fishes; rather, it was a miracle of changing selfish people into generous people due to the example of Christ.

It was the miracle of the birth of love into grudging hearts.  
It was the miracle of changed men and women with something of Jesus in them to banish their selfishness.

If that is so, then in the realest sense, Jesus fed them with himself and sent his Spirit to dwell within their hearts.

Actually, it doesn't matter how we understand this miracle because one thing is sure—when Jesus is there, the weary find rest and the hungry soul is fed.