

I'd like to take you on a trip back to my eleventh grade AP European History class. The year was 2007 and my teacher at the time had been teaching so long, that he was actually my mom's history teacher when she was in high school. So needless to say, they had a lot of experience. Which is why it was so interesting that on exams, we would be allowed to have a cheat sheet. Now, a cheat sheet was defined as a regular size index card with notes on a single side. And as I prepped for a test, I thought I was so smart because I wasn't going to write normal sized notes. No, I decided to write really, really small notes because then you could get more information on the index card. Now you might be thinking that this is a rather poor way of teaching, because how am I really going to show that I know the material when I have all the notes there in front of me? But the thing is, by preparing the cheat sheet on that index card, when it came to actually taking the exams, I didn't need the cheat sheet. I already knew the material. We were tricked into studying.

I think the Gospel of John must have known about such a tactic because right from the very beginning we learn what this whole Jesus story is about: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth." That's our cheat sheet. And we need this cheat sheet because there is a test. For the Gospel of John, it's a test that comes as a single question: Who is Jesus? But we need not worry because John's given us the cheat sheet. And so whatever is to come in John's Gospel, whatever happens concerning Jesus, if we hold onto this cheat sheet, the test is easy. We know that it's all about Jesus, the Word of God, who comes in the flesh, revealing the glory of God through grace and truth. Everything in John's Gospel points to this claim, in order that faith and trust in God's promise may abound in our lives.

But John just can't help himself. He knows that we might not always remember this and so like Hansel and Gretel leaving a trail of breadcrumbs, he sprinkles in little reminders, little hints that pull us back to remember, "Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, came and lived among us, revealing the glory of God through grace and truth." So let's just say that today's reading is an awfully big bread crumb. You can decide if that's punny or not. But what else is the feeding of the 5,000 that a great, big, giant reminder that in Jesus, God has taken on flesh to be with us in and through all things? What else is it but an act of incomprehensible grace? What else is it, but an enduring reminder of the abundance of love that God has for you and for me and for the whole world? And what else could it possibly be, but a chance for us to be strengthened in faith, having heard and experienced the promise of God's goodness once again?

Jesus gathers on a mountainside with the disciples and a massive crowd, who continues to follow him, goes with. You can imagine he's tired. You can imagine the disciples are exhausted from the constant swarming of people. And even in spite of all of this, Jesus' first question to the disciples is, "Where are we going to buy these people something to eat?" Which is probably the last thing the disciples wanted to hear because who really enjoys the idea of having to go find food for over 5,000 people? That's a lot of food and it's incredibly expensive. But it's here that we need to remember our cheat sheet. Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, came to live among us, revealing the glory of God through grace and truth. Jesus, as God with us, will do what God has always done and will always do: provide. And provide he does, as Jesus somehow takes 5 loaves and 2 fish and not only feeds everyone until they are full to the brim and need to put on stretchier pants, but there's leftovers!

But even in light of such a miraculous and gracious act, the question still remains: Who is Jesus? Because the truth is, how we answer this question not only shapes our understanding of God, but it shapes how we understand the call to be disciples of Jesus. It's interesting that the crowd, after receiving more than they could possibly ask for, wants to swarm Jesus and make him king. They like Jesus – who wouldn't? But perhaps more importantly, they like what Jesus provides. Their faith and their hope and their joy is not found so much in the promise that in Jesus, God has promised to be with us and show us grace. In their desire to make Jesus king, it's revealed that their faith, their hope, their joy is found in what Jesus gives, rather than who Jesus is. Do you see the difference? It's not about who Jesus is, but about what can this guy do for me.

And if we're honest, we've all had times where we fall into that line of thought. We want to know what's in it for us. We run a cost-benefit analysis in our minds to see if continuing a relationship is worth it to us or not. Our culture is permeated with this idea that faith in God means extra blessing, greater success, higher prestige – fill in the blank, you've heard it all before. We jump around from church to church to church asking what each one can do for me and what do I get out of it. But the promise of Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, is not found in the *things* he gives. The promise rests in the fact that what Jesus offers and what Jesus gives is the abundance of himself. His presence, his life, his person is his gift of grace. What Jesus gives is all of himself. What God gives is all of God's self. And that's more than enough. We sometimes forget that – and there's grace for that, too. Because our faith is built on the foundation of who Jesus is and not solely by what benefit there is to us. So who is Jesus? Well, you already know. And if you forget, remember there's a cheat sheet for that. Amen.