

Chasing Jesus: Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

by [William H. Lamar IV](#) in the [July 12, 2003](#) issue

When we use words, images and pictures to communicate who God is and what God has done, we speak of God as shepherd, mother, fire, cloud and love. We relate to God using ideas that are common to our shared human experience because that is all we know how to do. Thus the scripture writers speak of God anthropomorphically, and God becomes a father with two bewildered sons in Jesus' parable or, as God was for my grandparents, a lawyer and a doctor. Speaking of God in human terms helps us know God.

When I came to the community where I served as pastor, I thought about God's relationship with this place. I looked for an image that would speak to our experience in one of the poorest communities in Central Florida. We needed a face, a story and an identity. Slumlords rule here, drugs are rampant, low wages are common, and streets full of litter tell of lives littered with hopelessness. I needed a living, breathing metaphor for the community I was called to serve. I found that metaphor in John 6.

"A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick." My community is the crowd following Jesus because they saw what he was doing. Why follow a healer? Because they knew that they were sick. But we must not limit the comparison to the community around Jesus long ago, or to my congregational community. You and I must see that we too are in the crowd. We too are suffering from maladies of one sort or another, and this is why we seek after Jesus. We are sick. In desperation we seek someone to heal us. When we recognize our illness, we go to great lengths to find healing.

Our culture frowns upon the desperation demonstrated by this crowd. Being desperate for material things and status and position is one thing our culture understands, and even applauds. But chasing Jesus is not likely to earn one a standing ovation. Yet the crowd's longing for Jesus reminds us of the image of the psalmist longing for God—"like a deer panting for water." Or in the songwriter's parlance, we need God "like the desert needs rain."

So when Jesus goes up the mountain, the crowd follows. He does not turn away those who seek him. All human beings know the pain of rejection, of being unwanted. In my community, doors have been shut in our faces. Windows have been locked. But Jesus sits atop the mountain waiting. Imagine the people he sees coming toward him. There are liars, thieves and beggars. There are murderers and malcontents. But Jesus does not ask for résumés or credentials. He simply welcomes all who appear.

Then Jesus feeds them. He knows our hunger because he has experienced it himself. Did he not teach us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread?" But even before the people ask for bread, Jesus, the Bread of Life, is making provision for them. And from where does the provision come? A quiet little boy with fish and bread shares with Jesus and something astonishing happens. The whole crowd is blessed. No gift given to the Lord is given in a vacuum. Instead, all gifts given to God bless the entire body of Christ. We climb the hill in need of healing and receive what the body needs to be made well—adequate nourishment. But fish and bread are not all he comes to give us. He comes to give us himself; he comes to give us God. We may misinterpret his desire to bless us and try to crown him an earthly king, but his kingdom is not based on human needs or human approval. His kingdom is initiated and sustained by God.

We employ human terms to communicate who God is to one another, and God responds by employing human terms to communicate with us. But God uses not only words, pictures and images, but Jesus, the Word become flesh and dwelling among us. We look for ways to express who God is, and here God is among us in Jesus Christ, feeding, forgiving, healing and reconciling.

This is why Paul bursts into exuberant praise in Ephesians 3. What was hidden is now revealed. Jesus Christ is among us and has granted to the hungry crowds access to God in boldness and confidence through faith. No more words and laws and oracles but God with us, for us and in us. So we, along with Paul, bow before the father. We pray for spiritual strength. We pray that the God who has come will dwell in our hearts through faith. We pray for the power to comprehend, with the saints, the breadth and length and height and depth of God's love in Christ.

We praise God because we, as members of the crowd, have tasted the generosity of God through Christ. This love surpasses all knowledge. Love that feeds hungry crowds cannot be explained. Love that turns no one away cannot be explained. Love that causes one to sacrifice oneself for the sake of another cannot be explained. This love was experienced when a crowd scaled a mountain to receive it and Jesus

mounted a cross to “shed it abroad.” When we finally acknowledge that books and lectures and sermons cannot adequately contain what we want to say about God’s love and God’s mercy, we explode in doxology: “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”