

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Mistaken identity is not an uncommon thing. The Bible records more than one incident of mistaken identity. The narrative which is most important for our message today is found in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John. It is a case of mistaken identity - Jesus is not who they thought he was.

Imagine you are a Jew in Palestine a little more than 2,000 years ago. You hear about a man named Jesus who is teaching and healing in a region around the Sea of Galilee. You decide you want to hear him. Is he really a man sent from God? You don't know. You only know him by reputation. You want to find out for yourself.

You're self-employed as a farmer or a fisherman or a shopkeeper. It would be no big deal if you closed down the shop or left the boat or the farm for the day and went to where Jesus is teaching. But the meeting lasts longer than you expected. Jesus obviously doesn't realize it is written in stone that worship services should always conclude sharply at 10:15 or 12:15.

He keeps teaching and healing people long into the afternoon. People are sitting there in awe at his wisdom and his acts of healing. It is a wonderful event. It's all you had hoped it would be and more. However, your stomach is beginning to growl. You had come expecting that the event would last an hour or so; you hadn't even thought to pack a lunch. Not a brilliant move. Is there a village nearby where you can grab a sandwich? NO.

Then you notice the Teacher talking to one of his associates. You step a little closer so you can hear. The Teacher asks, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" Good question. At least the Teacher is aware of your situation. Little good that will do, however. About all he can do under these circumstances is to pronounce the benediction and tell everybody to go home.

One of the Teacher's associates, a man named Philip, can see how hopeless the situation is. "It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" he says. You're thinking, We're on top of a mountain. How are you going to get the food up here even if you had the funds to buy it?

But everyone starts sitting down. Then the Teacher does something unbelievable no, unbelievable doesn't even begin to describe what you are witnessing. The Teacher takes the five small barley loaves that the boy had with him, says a prayer over them, and then starts passing the bread among the crowd. Five thousand men, and no telling how many women and children? Five tiny barley loaves? Who's he kidding? Then he does the same with the small fish.

But something miraculous is happening. Something that cannot be explained. The more bread that is eaten, the more bread there seems to be. The same thing is happening with the fish. Five barley loaves and two small fish and thousands of people are being fed. "That's impossible," you think as you reach out for your share. "It's impossible. Fish and bread don't multiply. What's happening here?" Then the thought grabs your mind: "Holy smokes. God is here. This is holy ground. I am standing in the presence of God."

This is the impact Jesus had on people. They came to see a simple carpenter who built cabinets and kitchen tables and instead they found themselves in the presence of the one who

created the universe. Make no mistake about it. Jesus was more than a wise teacher. We have always had wise teachers. Every faith has laid claim to wise teachers. And we should listen to them. But Jesus was more than a great teacher.

On the hillside of the Galilean sea shore the people realized they were in the presence of God. "Surely this is the prophet God was going to send into the world." They wanted to make him King. (pause) Wasn't that also one of Satan's temptations when Jesus began his ministry? "Jesus...just fall down and worship me and I will give you all the kingships the world has to offer."

Jesus was misunderstood by the crowds which followed Him; who wished to make Him an earthly king to provide for their physical wants. But let's have no mistaken identities when it comes to the Christ.

We all want to be understood. Jesus is not the exception to this rule. You can almost count on your fingers the number of times that somebody actually got some inkling, some partial understanding, of who He was and what He was doing.

Years before He began His active ministry, after Jesus had been born in Bethlehem, wise men, magi, came from the East to worship Him. Thinking a prince would be born in a palace, they went to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who is born King of the Jews?" Their misunderstanding was compounded by Herod, who thought Jesus was a political rival, so he sent his henchmen to murder the male children of that small Judean town.

Jesus was misunderstood by the Pharisees who considered Him a blasphemer, heretic, the devil incarnate, an uneducated upstart, a partygoer who was trying to rewrite God's Scripture and disregard His laws. The priests of Jesus' day thought of Jesus as competition, a false prophet, guiding the people down a path of doom and destruction. Read through the Gospels and you will be amazed at the intensity of misunderstanding which surrounded the Savior.

Nowhere, I believe, is the misunderstanding of the Lord greater than in His own boyhood hometown of Nazareth. In the sixth chapter of his narration of Jesus' life, Mark tells us what happened when Jesus came home to visit His family, His friends; the people who had watched Him grow into manhood. Today it is customary, when a native Son makes good, for the people of His hometown to proudly claim some responsibility in having shaped their hero. On every major road that leads into the community, the town puts up a sign which says: "The birthplace of..." or "The boyhood home of..." and then they name the famous individual.

Jesus, the same Jesus who had taught a great crowd on the Sea of Galilee, who had calmed a storm; who had driven out demons, who had healed a woman of a hemorrhage; who had raised a dead man's daughter, Jesus was coming home.

John tells us that the people who should have known Jesus best, who had seen Him grow up, were pretty much unimpressed. They turned to each other and asked, "...and where did He get these words of wisdom? Isn't this the carpenter... the lowly, uneducated carpenter?" It wasn't a compliment. They said to each other, "Isn't this Mary's Son?" The reference to Jesus being the "Son of Mary" wasn't a flattering remark, either. In the first century, sons were known by their father's names. To associate Jesus with His mother was a real put down. The people of Nazareth weren't done. They knew this guy; they knew His family, and they weren't impressed.

Why should they be? Their favorite Son had not turned out as everyone thought He should. As the oldest Son of Mary, and with His father apparently out of the picture, it would have been expected that Jesus would have become head of the household and chief provider for His family. He had left Nazareth as a carpenter and alone. Now He had come back as a Rabbi, with a gaggle of disciples trailing behind.

It wasn't the first time Jesus had been misunderstood. It certainly would not be the last. Jesus came to fulfill His Father's plan to save us from our sins. Jesus came to give His life as a ransom for our souls; but people don't want to hear that. They don't want to admit they are helpless before the Law of God. They don't want to confess that if they are going to be saved, that salvation must be built completely and totally upon the work Christ completed upon the cross and guaranteed at His empty tomb.

Sure, folks are glad to accept Jesus as a teacher. He said many wonderful things, things that you can engrave on a wooden plaque and hang in a prominent place on a dining room wall. "Jesus was good that way," people admit. "He gave voice to many uplifting thoughts and moral concepts which teach us how to live, how to get along, how to care each for each other." But that's as far as they go. They refuse to be taken further. Jesus, for them, is misunderstood.

To be your Savior from sin is why He was born into this world. To be your Savior from the law's condemnation is why He lived a perfect life. To be your Savior from the devil's temptations is why He rejected every shortcut, every sidetrack that Satan proposed. To be your Savior, so you might be accepted into heaven, Jesus put up with ignorance, opposition, and misunderstanding, far beyond anything we have experienced. So you might be able to stand before God, washed clean of your sin, is why innocent Jesus allowed Himself to be condemned at an assortment of trials including a Jewish court, the Roman governor, a pretentious king, and a crowd calling for His crucifixion. So you might live forever, Jesus died. It is my prayer that you understand Jesus is your Savior; that you believe He is your Redeemer. Amen.