

“What Is the Miracle?”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

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We move from the gospel of Mark to the gospel of John this week, though since the lectionary has five weeks in a row about Jesus as the bread of life, all in John 6, I will be diverging from these readings to look at a PG version of David and Bathsheba next week, and then considering some Mark texts that appear in the lectionary cycle only when Easter is very early in the year.

As we know, each of the four gospels has its own focus, its particular theology, as each was written for a particular community of first century followers of Christ. The distinct difference in style and content of the gospel of John is widely recognized, though Luke also has a large section of parables and teachings unique to his gospel.

Jesus' feeding of the five thousand is one event that appears in all four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In all four, the food for the feeding is two fish and five loaves of bread. Yet, as often happens when the same story appears in more than one gospel, our minds blend the variations together. If asked from where Jesus received the fish and bread, most would say from a young boy, though the boy appears only in John's gospel; in Matthew, Mark and Luke, the fish and bread are from the disciples' own provisions. And, for we preachers who love to title a sermon, “You give them something to eat,” which is what Jesus tells the disciples when asked how the crowd will be fed, I cannot use that title this morning, for in John's gospel, it is Jesus, who asks the disciples from where one could buy enough bread to feed the huge crowd.

One more note before we read our lesson. While our cover image of the boy offering the fish and bread to Jesus is accurate to our John lesson, it seems to portray the disciples serving the food to the crowd. In John, it is Jesus himself who distributes the food, with the disciples gathering up the fragments.

Our lesson tells of two miracles. The first is the feeding of the five thousand, and the second is Jesus' appearance to his disciples at night, walking on water toward them as they struggled in a boat on the rough waves of the Sea of Galilee. And yes, I know the joke that he must have known where the rocks were, even at night. John 6:1-21:

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ²A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷Philip answered him, “Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” ⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?”

¹⁰ Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹ Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." ¹³ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

¹⁵ When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

This is the end of the first miracle, with John's particular detail of those who saw the miracle wanting to crown Jesus king, and his response to retreat back to the mountain. Jesus goes up the mountain alone, and has not yet rejoined the disciples as the sun sets, foreshadowing what is about to happen as the disciples relaunch the boat without him. As public as was the miracle of the feeding, Jesus' walk on the water is only observed by his disciples. We continue our lesson.

¹⁶ When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, ¹⁷ got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. ¹⁸ The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹ When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. ²⁰ But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." ²¹ Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

If a spouse, partner, or child calls or announces she or he has invited five extra people for dinner that evening, it usually sparks a reaction. For easy going, go-with-the-flow types, or those who have already planned to bake lasagna to feed twenty, there might be a comment about "short notice," but few waves and little fury expressed. Yet, I expect more often such an invitation incites a testy response, in which one hears the words "disrespect" or "inconsiderate," and the questions, "How could you?" or "What were you thinking?" Still, unless the invitation is vetoed, there follows an assessment of available provisions and plans for what to prepare.

In all four gospels, Jesus and the disciples discuss how to feed a gathered crowd of five thousand, with various reactions of inability, anxiety, and impossibility. It would not be different from someone coming to a session meeting with a proposal to feed five thousand people this Thanksgiving, right here at the church. You can imagine the reaction. First, I have little doubt someone would mention the fire marshal and insurance, modern day roadblocks to creative ideas. Then, the conventional responses regarding cost and capacity would be followed by a suggestion some other group would be better equipped to feed five thousand.

It is a similar discussion I find in our lesson. Jesus tests Philip with the question of how they are to feed the crowd, and the disciple responds with the impossibility of doing so. He takes out his calculator and decides even six months of wages would not pay for the needed food. While disciple Andrew locates a boy with two fish and five loaves of bread, he too sees only impossibility. At this point, I will admit my response to Jesus would echo that of Philip and Andrew. I also recognize we often put a lot of energy into assuring ourselves an idea is impossible, impractical, and beyond our capability.

Perhaps it is because my father was an accountant, but with few exceptions, I have much appreciated those we call “bean counters” in the churches I have served. These are folks who keep the books, calculate the costs, remind us we must meet current commitments before taking on new ministries, attend to details, and warn when funds are running low.

Yet, it is just because I may have inherited the gene of financial caution and prudence, I have learned to hear, and come to appreciate the voices who call us to step out in faith and trust in God’s impractical calls into the new and unknown. These are the folks who sense when it is time to feed the five thousand, and when asked, “But will God pay the electric bill?” they may well say, “If God so chooses.”

In one church I served, it was the staff’s vision that provided the buffer for me, the life jacket that prevented me from drowning in a pool of financial prudence where new ideas would drown unless their bottom line had no tinges of red.

To this point, we have only been dealing with the prelude to the feeding. Let’s move on to the miracle itself. In my study of this passage, I had my memory jogged to my own Sunday school days. In two different commentaries, the writers told of what I recall learning as a youth – the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand was a miracle of sharing. You too may have learned the interpretation of Jesus so moving the people with his teaching and his presence, they began opening up hidden picnic baskets and sharing with each other. In this scenario, the miracle is simply Jesus’ ability to incite the gathered crowd to share. My goodness that sounds a lot like Woodstock to me, though it would seem only the fish would be smoked in the biblical story.

What a wonderful idea, for Jesus to instill a heart of sharing in so many people, such that in the end all were filled, none was hungry. Some might even have gone home and commented about how one family member, who normally refuses to share with anyone, opened a backpack and let anyone take anything they wanted, including an expensive jar of pickled herring. “It was a miracle!”

Yet, the notion the miracle is simply Jesus installing a sharing chip within people’s hearts ends up, as one writer puts it, downplaying the miraculous aspect. Instead of fostering an exploration of God’s ability to act in surprising ways and transform human expectations, the [sharing]... version of the story focuses on the ability of persons to solve their own problems...” [Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3, Bartlett and Taylor, eds., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, p. 286]

For me, to find the miracle in the feeding it is helpful to consider the second miracle first – Jesus walking on water. Again, Jesus is not with the disciples when they set out in the evening, but comes to them in the midst of rough seas. Though John writes the disciples see Jesus, scholars debate as to whether they recognize him as Jesus. In any case, we know they were terrified, and his words calm their fears. In most translations, his words are, “It is I; do not be afraid.” Yet, what is telling is how many biblical commentators, and most biblical footnotes indicate Jesus’ words can also be translated as simply, “I am.” Of course, we recall this is how God self-identifies to Moses – “I am.” This is what is called a theophany, a revelation of God. In this sense, Jesus is not showing a photo ID to his disciples, but revealing his essence. Jesus is saying, “I am. I am God. I am God, with you. Have no fear.” So the miracle is not so much the walking on water, but God’s willingness to be so very presence in the midst of human fear.

I take that sense with me when I go back to the feeding of the five thousand. We now see more than just a teacher and his disciples, more than just a preacher engaging a crowd to share, we see the very person of God. So, when Jesus asks from where they are going to find food enough for this number of people, he already knows the answer is not in crunching the numbers, or counting the beans, but in the miracle of God’s grace and generosity, that begins with, “These people need food.”

Let’s go back to that proposal to feed five thousand for Thanksgiving, but change it to a group of five thousand hungry children we find in our parking lot as we leave this morning. My guess is we would put away our calculators, and instead of asking, “How could we possibly feed them?,” we would begin to plan how we can – or perhaps more accurately, trust God can.

What is the miracle? Miracles are linked to God’s response to human need – hunger in our first, fear in the second. A miracle for me is lodged in a mystery I am content not to explain. A miracle is received in the present though it stretches us into the future. A miracle overwhelms us with such passion, we are willing to set aside what is deemed humanly prudent and do what is divinely inspired. So, with abandon, we put our resources, our gifts, our money, our selves, our lives on the line, for God’s use.

Miracles are not our doing. Miracles are God’s ability to overcome the limits of human practicality, overwhelm the arguments of human prudence, and overturn the roadblocks of human resistance.

Miracles are the abundant grace of God we receive, often just at those points we have calculated there is not enough money, or convinced ourselves we lack the time, or energy or people. It is this grace that gives us faith to say, “If it is the right thing to do, it can be done,” for we trust God can and will find the way to feed five thousand, or even five more at dinner tonight.