

“Bread and Water”

Valley Presbyterian Church – February 24, 2019

7th Sunday after Epiphany

Rev. John Wahl

Matthew 14:13-33

“It’s a miracle!” This might be one of the most over-used proclamations in our current lexicon – you may hear it said in reference to anything from finding misplaced keys to getting a surprise “A” on a test to hitting a half-court shot to beat the buzzer. Still, as much as we might talk about miracles, believing that they actually happen is a different story. When we hear the familiar stories of multiplied loaves and fishes or walking on the water, we tend to look for a more reasonable rationale. In today’s first, story – the Feeding of the 5000 – for example, the miracle of multiplication is commonly explained away by supposing that it was not just one little boy who offered to share his lunch – a detail offered in Luke’s account of the story – but that his example inspired others also to share what they had brought; meaning that, in the end, there was more than enough for everyone.

In today’s second story – of Jesus walking on the water – even the disciples in the boat witnessing the miracle are confused; for when they see him coming towards them, they cry out in fear that it must be a ghost. “Take heart,” Jesus says to them, “it is I; do not be afraid.” As you heard, Peter – as bold as ever – decides that if Jesus can walk on the water, maybe he can as well; so he steps out of the boat to walk toward Jesus; but, becoming frightened, he begins to sink; crying out to Jesus, “save me!” Jesus reaches out his hand and accompanies him back to the boat; it is only then that the winds and waves subside.

Well, how are we going to explain this? Some have proposed that maybe there was a sand bar in the middle of the sea, and that while Jesus would have known where to stand, Peter stepped off and began to sink. As for the subsiding storm, others point out that the weather around the Sea of Galilee is known to turn on a minute’s notice; maybe Jesus happened to step into the boat exactly when the change was imminent. And yet, the prevalent reasoning appears to be that while miracles might have been common in Jesus’ day – or it at least seemed that way to them – today is a different story, altogether.

With the 14th chapter of Matthew, we have reached the gospel’s mid-point. At the beginning of the chapter, prior to today’s reading, an important event takes place in Jesus’ life: the story is told how his beloved cousin, John the Baptist, has been gruesomely beheaded by King Herod, the ruler of the region.

It may be no surprise, then, that the first reading begins with Jesus' withdrawal from the crowds by boat to what is described as a deserted place. His retreat does not last long, though, as the crowds soon arrive by foot; seeking further healing and instruction. Instead of turning them away or insisting on more "me" time when he saw them coming, Jesus – as we are told – had *compassion* on them; even with his own heart broken over John's death, Jesus *took heart* and helped to heal others.

When evening came, the disciples – expecting fatigue in Jesus, or maybe just sensing it in themselves – suggest that Jesus dismiss the crowds and send them to the nearby villages in order to find something to eat. Jesus declines, responding to the disciples that the crowds did not need to go away, but instead saying, "you give them something to eat." The disciples plead their case by responding that they have nothing but five loaves and two fish.

The key word here might be "but." While Jesus saw the large crowd descending upon him and chose to act out of compassion, the disciples displayed a more typically human reaction: they saw a lot of people and just a little food; they recognized a situation in which they might be blamed for coming up short. They had a clear view of their limited resources; they know how much they have. ¹

Jesus sits the people down, blesses the bread, and miraculously multiplies these limited rations. And yet, it is the disciples who pass out the food and then gather up the leftovers. Jesus told the disciples to feed them, and they did; it may be that the crowds never noticed Jesus' miracle-working. This does not make the miracle any less valid, any less amazing. But it brings the disciples into the miracle as participants; their actions are not limited by their assessment of scarce resources compared to large numbers in the crowd; they are not constrained by "but."

I would argue that in our current context, there are some pretty amazing stories about miraculous feeding. Some of you experienced one during our church anniversary, when 20,000 meals were packaged for the hungry in one day; or another this week; as we learned about the lives being transformed through EDWINS Restaurant and Leadership Institute where hundreds of formerly incarcerated men and women hungry for a second chance are provided job training, housing and real opportunities to moving forward. In many urban centers, including here in Northeast Ohio, vacant lots are being reclaimed and transformed into gardens; previously boarded up homes are being used to house indoor fish farms. Just yesterday, I met someone who has installed a hydroponic growing system into a 40-foot shipping container, which will produce as many greens and herbs as four acres by traditional farming methods.

Sure, you might argue, but these are not miracles; these are just examples of good ideas and applications. Instead, I believe that this is how God brings us, and our

¹ Richard Swanson, "A Provocation"

neighbors around us, into the miracle. In a miracle, God is able to accomplish that which we cannot do, or even imagine doing, on our own. The disciples looked at their meager resources and could only conceive of how far they could make it go, rather than believing that with God, all things are possible.

Which brings us back to our second miracle story – Jesus (and Peter) walking on the water. This story begins again with Jesus alone. Only this time, instead of withdrawing to the desert, he sends the disciples and crowds on ahead, while he stays behind to pray for most of the night. In the meantime, the disciples are on a boat in the middle of the stormy sea.

The boat is a common symbol for the church: for though the wind and waves surrounding Christian communities can be frightening, our relationships with God and each other can shield us from the storm. Water, and especially the deep waters of the sea, represented chaos – all that could not be controlled. Rudders to guide us, oars to power us, sails to propel us; these are like the tools and gifts of the Spirit that a church uses to navigate through sometimes choppy waters. And at times, we – like Peter – might be called to step out in faith; trusting in Christ to catch us even when we begin to slip or sink.

Peter quickly discovers that it is one thing to be battered by strong winds while sitting in the same boat with others. It is a whole different thing to be out alone on the water, surrounded by the strong winds. It soon become apparent that Jesus and Peter really were not *in the same boat*; Jesus has been walking for some distance, Peter has not; Jesus encourages the disciple not to be afraid, but to “take heart,” while Peter becomes frightened by looking around him. Jesus takes note of Peter’s limited resource of faith, and questions him, saying, “why did you doubt?” They proceed together back to the boat and the storm subsides.

Sometimes faith means seeing the boat for what it is: to recognize that church is a shared experience; with the privilege and opportunity to lean on and encourage each other in the midst of the storm. Peter decided to leave his shipmates and to join Jesus out on the water, rather than waiting along with the others for Jesus to join them on the boat. Why this is, we are not exactly sure; maybe he wanted to prove himself faithful, or maybe he was doing what Scripture calls “putting God to the test.” For, sometimes, we want miracles not for the good of others – not, for instance, to feed the hungry despite seemingly limited resources – but instead for ourselves; a miracle is desired even if it is at the expense of others.²

Often, we – like Peter, people of little faith – desire miracles because we want to have control over chaos. And to a large extent – in the ways that we have made advances in science, medicine, and technology – we can explain much more than in generations past; and we have hope to find even more cures and advances in the future. But we

² Mitzi Smith from *WorkingPreacher.com*

deceive ourselves when we imagine that chaos has no hold on us; that whenever we step out of the boat, we'll have all the courage and strength we need to handle whatever waves come at us.

Maybe Jesus knew, when he invited Peter out of the boat, that when he felt the wind blowing and the water lapping over his feet, he would begin to sink. For, at that moment, when Peter cries out, "save me!" Jesus demonstrates that he will pull us out of the chaos. It does not matter that there is doubt, nor that the amount of faith displayed is so meager, Jesus responds to the cries of those who are sinking, bringing them back to the boat; calming the windy storms; and doing among us what we might not even believe is possible; offering the kind of peace that is beyond our expectation or understanding.

Can miracles be real? Or, are they just a thing of the past? What I have witnessed – whether out in the midst of chaos, or on a boat protected from the storm – is that miracles indeed are real; for if it were only up to us, and the meager resources of food or faith we have to offer, we would likely be sunk. But, time and again, I see abundance when all signs point to scarcity; I sense grace when judgment is the expectation; I recognize mercy that comes from a place which is beyond our human ability alone. It shows up in the miracle of learning and innovation; of healing from loss; of overcoming obstacles; of repairing that which has been torn apart. In these places and times, God is present, blessing and multiplying; Christ is at work, reaching out and lifting up.

While these might not be the kinds of miracles that we want: proving before our eyes that God is real, or that our faith alone is sufficient to see us through; I believe that miracles are real. They are evidence – even if not in the tangible form we would like – that God is in our midst. "It is I," Jesus says to the disciples while approaching them, walking on the sea; the same Jesus who – after the resurrection – will promise them, "I will be with you, always."

Sometimes, though, we and those around us have our doubts about miracles; and whether any of us can believe Christ's promise is true. We are called, therefore, to participate in and proclaim miracles when they come to pass, to continue to believe that nothing is impossible with God; so that those doubts may be countered; and unbelief may be turned – miraculously – into belief. AMEN.