

"THREE MIRACLES OF JESUS:

II. The Day 5000 Hungry People Were Fed..."

Text: "And all ate and were satisfied....

and those who ate were five thousand."

Mark 6:42-44

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Last week we introduced this little Lenten Sermon Series on "Three Miracles of Jesus and What They Mean to Us" with the exciting story of Jesus walking on top of the water on the Sea of Galilee. I am captivated each time I read it. As we come nearer to the most blessed miracle of all on Easter Morning, we are looking for the meaning behind the miracles. We defined biblical miracles as "natural events which occur but which are caused by the direct intervention of God in setting aside the otherwise inviolable natural laws of how things work. Miracles have various purposes in the Scriptures, but mainly in the Gospel miracles of Jesus, they are meant to authenticate his presence as the Savior of the world and the one true Son of God. Our Biblical Text this morning tells of the Feeding of the 5,000 from just 5 loaves and 2 little fishies.

Curiously, this is the only miracle of Jesus which appears in all four Gospels, outside the Resurrection itself. The first three writers often worked from the same sources. Eighteen of the miracles out of the total of thirty-seven are triplicated in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Never with John, so when he decides to join in with this one only, remembering all the others he might have chosen, it surely takes on a special meaning and should spark out interest.

Why we will never know. It is a phenomenal story of course and it surely fits the description of a bona fide miracle. But there are others of equal interest which John might have included to make his point. By the way John adds six other miracles on his own: like turning the water into wine at the wedding feast (a lovely story), and healing the blind man in John 9 (one of my favorites) appear only in the Last Gospel. He also has the exclusive on the raising of Lazarus from the dead which we will turn to next week.

There are numerous theories as to why this feeding miracle was included by John. He was surely present on the occasion. It could be that as Thomas Malthus was overwhelmed with the suffering among the Irish poor when he wrote his eccentric satire about it; and as missionary William Carey never forgot the first time he saw the teeming numbers of children dying of hunger in Calcutta, it could be that John too had some personal experience and affinity for the hungry of the world. We do not know where he was or what he saw and did for over 50 years. It could be.

But I think there is a deeper, more personal theological reason. I think he chose to include it because, being more of a sacramentalist than the other three, it reminded him of the first holy communion as Jesus shared the bread and wine with the disciples in the Upper Room on the night of his betrayal, imparting his body and blood to the twelve disciples who were fearful and famished spiritually - so he fed the crowd who sat outside on the green grass at the foot of the mountain in groups of 50 or 100.

To digress, there is also another miracle feeding of the crowds, told by Matthew and Mark - the Feeding of the Four Thousand. There are a few minor differences, but the similarities to the miracle we are discussing today are legion – including the compassion Jesus had for the crowd, the seven loaves which he broke before them, and the distribution of elements as the disciples served the bread to four-thousand people. (Proper Presbyterian style, you will notice. See Matthew 15:32-39 and Mark 8:1-10)

When I said that the Miracle of the 5000 appears in all four Gospels it is not to say the four are identical. Each author gives it his own particular spin, as they do with many other stories of Jesus. In Mark, for example, the first Gospel, the disciples had been sent out on an evangelistic tour. When they returned they were all tired out. Jesus told them to, "Come to rest a while." They deserved it. Preaching and teaching and traveling and healing are hard work. Preaching looks easy but all who do it well will tell you it is hard work. (Read the biography of Billy Graham and it will tell you how exhausting his Campaigns were to him and his team and how much he gave up on the home front.) The disciples were exhausted from their Crusade. So, Jesus took them all out in a little boat and sailed across the lake to his favorite trysting place. But when the crowd saw them going, they ran around the side of the Lake and were already there when Jesus arrived. We mentioned last week how troublesome that would have been to the Master, who simply wanted to be alone for a while. You and I tend to get nervous when someone invades our private space, but it says that when "He saw the great crowds he had compassion on them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd." And, he taught them many things.

In Mark, the day rolled on and evening came. Here again the disciples tried to send everybody away, so they could go out and "buy some food for themselves." More like Mark than John to insert the need for individual responsibility. Jesus said, "No, we can't do that; let us feed them all." The astonished disciples said they could not afford it. Jesus said, "No, I didn't mean that: how much food do we have around here?" They told him that all they knew about were "five loaves and two fishes." Jesus said, "Sit the crowd down in companies of 50 and 100 people. Then He looked up to the heavens, blessed and broke the loaves, divided the fish, and all 5,000 men present ate their fill.

Now some one in the back row is probably asking how it really happened, or even if it happened at all. If so, how did Jesus do it? What was the trick? What stash of food was hidden in advance behind the trees? Our modern mind set is to question to want to know the why and how. There wasn't any trick!

I don't know if you have ever seen the show on television following the "Masters of Illusion" called "Magic's Biggest Secrets Finally" which exposes the tricks and scams of the magician on stage. I am obviously not a regular adherent, but I happened on it one night. First we saw the magic trick or illusion, perfectly executed to the amazement of the crowd; but the whole episode was replayed, again and again, exposing in great detail how it was done. Innocent enough, I guess.

Sometimes the expose is more captivating than the magic itself. Like I saw one of his assistants, incidentally a slim and beautiful young woman, get locked inside a box. The magic man then pierced through the box with three or four rapiers, one after the other. Finally, in the old circus favorite, he even sawed her in two. Poor girl. Oh dear, she was surely a goner, like we used to watch Superman weakened by the ubiquitous kryptonite, about to be crushed to certain death as the serial ended that Saturday morning out at the Enright Theatre. But, not to worry. It turns out that the young woman was contorted into a pretzel-like-twist around metal bars and the invading saws and swords missed her by millimeters. I was fascinated for a couple of minutes, but then I turned back to Jack Bauer and the real life dangers of "24"! The trickery all got boring. No matter how impressive the trick or the illusion, there was a natural explanation of how the deception was accomplished in full view of the audience.

There are no explanations like that for the New Testament miracles. Some competent New Testament commentators in each generation try time and again to find a natural explanation of how they were done. Edgar Goodspeed charmed us all with his studies back when I was a student. Thomas Jefferson was so bothered by the miracles in the New Testament that he wrote a condensed version of the Gospels which excluded them all. There are no secrets. They just happened, just as the Gospels say they did.

Since Christmas I have been reading a stimulating book our eldest daughter gave me written by Professor Thomas F. Torrance on The Incarnation of Jesus Christ. He was one of the most noted theologians of the 20th Century. In writing of the miracle of the incarnation, where Jesus became the full embodiment of the Creator God on earth, yet he still was completely and totally human, Dr. Torrance says bluntly that we will never understand why or how God did it. Yet, while we cannot hope to comprehend about it, still we can "apprehend" – his word - part of the meaning. He likens it to the way you grasp a football. You cannot get your hands fully around it, but you can hold on to it in one hand, reinforce it with the other: some can even throw it around with amazing accuracy. But no one can grasp it fully. You can apprehend it enough that you have the idea but you can never surround it.

In the Gospel of Matthew, there is a touching variation to the story. There the feeding miracle follows the death of John the Baptist, who had been executed by Herod after a foolish promise to his wife following a provocative dance around the dining hall by her daughter Salome. The King was enticed to offer the head of the Baptist as a reward for her seductive deed. When John died that kind of senseless, violent death, it troubled our Lord. Even though he was the Son of God, he was also a real live man who felt the pain of death. You do not say good bye to someone you love without it cutting a hole in the middle of your hopes. We are told later in John 11, our miracle for next week, that Jesus was so upset at the death of his friend Lazarus in Bethany that he burst into tears.

John was his cousin and lifelong friend. And Jesus did not have many friends. According to Matthew he needed some time to grieve. I always tell people to take time to grieve. The mysteries of life and death are overwhelming. Grief is slow and painful work; but if you avoid it and jump right back into the routine stream of your life, if you delay dealing with the loss of someone you love, you will get hung up on that lonely ridge and spend the rest of your life dodging death and wondering what happened.

So rather than be annoyed at the crowds Jesus kept teaching and healing the sick and comforting the downtrodden; and when they were all tired and worn out and hungry he invited them to sit down and have a pleasant meal. By the way, only Matthew is courteous enough to mention that 5000 was the number of men, besides he adds there were women and children there. It could more properly be called the feeding of the 10,000.

Luke adds that they went out to Bethsaida, a newly renovated city on the other side of the Lake which Philip had rebuilt in honor of the daughter of Emperor Augustus. When the day had gone away, Luke also writes that the disciples said, "Let's send them away Lord, so they can find something to eat for themselves." Luke, more than the other three, is always concerned with the hungry and homeless and the impaired. Maybe it was because he was a doctor.

By the time we get to John, the last Gospel, we have a large part of the original story, but John writes that it took place on the other side of the Sea of Tiberius. That is his pet name for the Sea of Galilee. Seeing the multitude, Jesus asked Philip, "How can we buy bread enough for these people?" Philip said it would cost 200 denarii to buy food enough for all of them. Just like John to personalize the stories of Jesus. A denarius can be translated "Penny." It was worth about 20 cents literally. At the time of Jesus one denarius represented a full day's wage for the average laborer. So it would take 200 days of a man's work to pay for the necessary food. John says it was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, who said to Jesus, wait a minute, "I have found a little boy who has five loaves and two fish."

That is a nice touch to the story. Jesus loved little children. I like to imagine that the boy's mother had baked the loaves that morning and that he was supposed to take them somewhere, maybe to his grandmother's house; but on the way he saw this huge crowd rushing all around the lake and his curiosity compelled him to stop and see what was going on.

Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, gave thanks, blessed them and had the disciples distribute the ever increasing supply of food. He adds that everyone ate their fill, and there were still twelve baskets of barley loaf left over, perhaps so that the boy could continue with his delivery. I don't know why there was so much left over.

Pause with me for a minute so we can get the moral and spiritual impact of the story. First, notice that it says Jesus had compassion on them. Jesus never sent anyone away, no matter what was wrong, what they had done or why they came. And he will never send you away either, no matter what you did. Whatever the need, he answered it. He could easily have said "Well everybody go on home now. Sunday School is over, see you next time around."

People can be problems. You and I can tend to treat them like that. But to Jesus, they were people! He never treated anyone as a burden: the prisoners, the handicapped, the sick, the bothersome; the persistent, the guilty, the hungry, the pain-in-the-necks, and the poor. He never asked why they were the way they were; he never judged them; he never told them they should have done this or that; he never second guessed them. When someone was in need, he responded. They were not problems, they were people – children of the heavenly father – made in his image and likeness – brother and sisters of the Christ.

I know that some of you have trouble with miracles. Sometimes I have trouble myself. But, if it seems incredible that five loaves and two fishes could feed five thousand people, then how credible is it that the Son of Man could come back from the dead, or that out of nothing God could make a world, or that a blind man could see, or a cripple rise and walk?

Or to bring it up to date that in our time a woman I know find a new life after her husband and child have died? Or that a marriage could be restored after decades of neglect? Or that a young person who was lost could be found again in Christ. How can a person overcome heartbreak, or grief, or alcoholism or drug addiction? How miraculous are all of those!

The disciples wanted to send the people away. "Let's get rid of them, they are such a bother." I hear it all the time. Wouldn't it be nice if we could get rid of all the evil people in the world? Just send them back to wherever they came from. This is our country after all. Who do they

think they are that they could come here and expect to be treated as equals? This is our land.

But wait a minute, waste a darn minute! Let me get personal. Who does this property along Sharon Road in the South Park area of what is now Charlotte, North Carolina really belong to, and who would we send back where? Whose land is it? Careful...Well, first of course you would have to say that it belongs to the Lord. It does, first and finally. Everything we have is on loan, for a while. "This earth is mine!" the Lord God can rightfully say.

Those at Sharon Church might want to insist that these 24 acres of our Campus belong to those who settled in this area and built the first Church in 1831. This is Presbyterian plateau, thank you and don't you forget it! But King George III could rightly object that it really belongs to him, or to his Kingdom, and that it bears the name of his beloved Charlotte the German Princess of Mecklenburg.

Nah we would say, his soldiers lost the war. But they didn't really, not here. The local revolutionaries lost the famous Battle of Charlotte on September 26, 1780. Their opposition to the Crown continued so vociferously that General Cornwallis nick-named Charlotte "The Hornet's Nest." Eventually our national revolutionaries out of the Virginian Peninsula defeated the British so it became our land. But did it?

The Indian Nations who were trading along the Catawba and Yadkin Rivers when Thomas Polk came wandering by and built his house near their trading post could rise up out of the dreadful abuse and annihilation of the Tribes and people and demand that we understand that it is their land; what we call "our property" actually belongs to them – to the Algonquians, the Chowanok, the Cherokee, the Yadkins, the Sioux and the others.

Since then there have been others who came to this stretch of land, some in more recent years from the North and from the South. Wouldn't it be nice if we could send them all away? Just like the disciples wanted to send the crowds away so they and their Jesus could have some privacy. Where did all these hungry and homeless people come from? Why can't they take care of themselves?

One Sunday morning outside the door of a former church, a hungry beggar positioned himself on the front steps and was asking people for money as they came into the Service. Now that would and did cause a stir. I agree it was awkward and a nuisance. One of our ushers came running into my study before the service telling me that he was going to call the police. "We have to that guy out of here, he is ruining everything; people are getting back into their cars. He has to go!" I said, "Why?" He said, "He's bothering our members. He's asking for money." I said "Of course, he is, he's hungry." Another Sunday one of the ushers actually did call the

cops because one of the hungry men in the Park across the street slipped into the narthex and lifted some food out of "The Food for the Hungry Boxes".

David Beers, a keystone of Sharon's outreach to the hungry, shared some local statistics with me this week. There has been a good response to the emergency calls for help with the homeless and the hungry this winter. The Loaves and Fishes group fed 84,045 last year, more than double the 37,902 who were fed in 2000. St. Peter's Soup Kitchen at the Urban Ministry Center are open 365 days a year for the homeless and expect to serve over 100,000 meals to the hungry in 2009. Many of our members have helped tremendously with these efforts. God bless you. Thanks to David and his kith and kin.

Then I pulled the statistics on hunger all around the world up on my computer. What a burden! In the last reported year there were 947 million literally hungry and undernourished people in the under developed nations of the world: 212 million in Sub-Saharan Africa alone, 313 million in South Asia, 45 million plus in South America, 218 million in East Asia and the Pacific region. (By the way I heard Dennis Grill, one of our teaching elders share these same statistics in a Sunday School Class several months back, but so far as I know no one there went out and did anything about them.) "How did it get to be that way? Why do these people have so many children? Why should we have to take care of them? It is hard enough these days to take care of ourselves." I have heard hundreds of Christians posing those kinds of questions through the decades. Why doesn't somebody do something to control it? Why can't they help themselves? They are irresponsible. "Not my problem!"

Ah but it is, and you can be sure that Jesus never asked that kind of question. I know we have to be realistic. Sure the leaders of the world have to work at correcting the long range situations which helped to cause hunger. Sure there are patterns of family control and education which must be done. But meanwhile, children are dying because they cannot get the food which is available if only we decided to get it to them. Why O Lord, why? That is not right!!

I think the real message of this feeding miracle of the 5000 is a reminder that Jesus cared for those who needed help, in this case those who needed some food. And he took that little basket which some small boy had with him, and he multiplied it into a monumentally cosmic basketful of food. Jesus spread it all around the multitude.

You and I do not have to it all; we don't even have to do a lot. We can count on Jesus Christ to do the rest, if we just bring him something he can use: only a little: a little prayer, a little basket, a little concern, a little kindness, a little compassion and he will take care of the rest.

But (Are you listening?) you can't bring "absolutely nothing" to the problems of hunger in the world. You can't keep feeding your own face and forget that within walking distance and all around the globe, God's own children are perishing.

You know it is just like Jesus to do it that way. He takes what ever you and I bring and multiplies it to a level of love and compassion we could never even dream about. A little drop of kindness deposited into the cosmic basket of goodness in the world, and presto, it becomes part of the forward movement which touches and changes the lives of many others.

It can happen in the kind words you offer to the people around you, even in your own home. I sent our youngest daughter a little message on Facebook which said something like I love you and I am proud of you dear one. One of our mutual friends wrote me to commend me, saying that he father seldom said a kind word of encouragement to her, her whole life long. It happens every time you forgive someone who has wronged you. It happens each and every time you turn your life over to Jesus Christ and invite him into you heart to stay.

Any time you deposit even a little goodness into the life of another person, it is like you have shared five little loaves and two little fishes with a huge crowd of people who are hungry for love and kindness. You don't need to have thousands of dollars. You and I are not required to move mountains. We cannot change the world; but you can change one person, i.e., you! And, after that initial change, Christ can change the other people around you. It is a miracle what a little kindness and food can do. Honey still brings the bees. I am not so much concerned about what happened with the bread and fish as I am concerned with what will happen to us if we fail to follow Jesus.

Back in the early nineteen-sixties in Pittsburgh, when I was first starting my ordained ministry, we initiated a little program for the hungry (rather novel back then) in the prosperous church I was serving as assistant minister. It was fine and fancy. It was so long ago that people still had to pay rent to sit in their pews and the ushers all wore fancy Morning Coats and striped trousers.

One parishioner, Amelia, took a liking to me. I don't know why, not that we agreed but it did not seem to bother her too much. She said she liked my refreshing honesty. One day she called me and started to scold me for this new program she heard I was initiating of giving food to the poor and, as she complained, turning our historic church into a grocery store. "After all," she chided, "all they have to do it go out and get a job."

But I was praying for the program and I also prayed for her. And she got interested by something I said from the pulpit. I was startled but I have learned not to be surprised at what God can do in working wonders among us. One Saturday she called and asked again

what I was trying to accomplish in giving something free to the poor. "Are you one of those socialists?" she asked. Those were the days when there were still hymns in the book which we sang about how God made people the way they were. some for high and some for low estate.

"Are you going to open a grocery store?" she wanted to know. "Are you going to feed all those derelicts? Why?" I said, "Because they are children of the Lord and they are Hungry." Silence on the line. We kept talking and ten minutes later she finally asked what she could do to help me. I said, "Well we are asking each member to bring a non-perishable food item on Sunday for the Food Bank" "What's non-perishable mean?" I said, "Oh, canned goods or boxed, cereal, soup - anything that does not have to be refrigerated, even a little jar of jelly."

She scoffed, "How can a little jar of jelly change the world?" I said, "I don't know, but God does - come and see." She astounded me when she said, "Well, I think you're crazy, but I will go along. What do you want me to bring?" I said, "Look around the pantry and bring a little bag of groceries to church." "I'll see what Lucy can find" she said, "and we will bring something with us tomorrow." I forgot to tell you that Amelia was extremely wealthy, daughter of the founder of a large steel company. Lucy was her downstairs maid and cook. She lived in a huge condominium up in Schenley Park, so huge she had cut a stairway up to the next floor so she had two full levels for the space she wanted.

Well, don't you know? Here came Amelia the next day in the back seat of her huge Mercedes limo, with Lucy up front with the driver. She sent Pearson into my office to see me. He looked something like that wonderful Morgan Freeman. In his hand, in a little cloth bag which I later learned was a Crown Royal purple one, were two "non perishable items." (Are you listening?) One was a jar of Beluga caviar - the real kind, which even back then cost over 100 dollars per ounce. The other was a can of artichoke hearts. Pearson said "Rev., this was all we could find in the pantry. Mrs. P. said to tell you we will bring some more next week." And they did...

Oh, dear. I never learned what happened to those two particular non-perishables; but I have smiled a thousand times when I think of that down-trodden poor old hungry soul who warmed his or her heart by eating caviar and artichoke hearts for lunch one day, not knowing what it was or what it cost.

"Inadequate food intake can jeopardize a child's cognitive development, physical well being, and social abilities. Nutritional deprivation in children during their developing years," I am quoting, "can lead to impaired physical growth, to brain under-development, to long term and severe emotional and physical health problems." (UNESCO Study Report, 1998) Good

education on proper nutritional training could save our society millions of dollars in costs for health care, mental and emotional health treatments, social and educational services, and all the rest.

Of that chunk of American families who are hungry it is true that some are lazy and refuse to work, some will cut any corner they can, some are dishonest and self serving; some would take a free ride. But isn't that also an apt description of the successful folk around the nation. These days it seems to be true among the hugely rich. But the bulk of those who poor and hungry are victims; they are from what we call "The working poor," from the disabled or aged or unemployed or unlucky. In other words they are mostly good people and they are trying. With the more recent turn of economic events, the numbers who need help are increasing through no fault of their own.

I don't know how Jesus fed the 5,000 men, plus the women and children. Some scholars I noted try to explain it away. I don't know how he did it! Neither do I know why the Lord does not perform another miracle in our time so all the hungry men, women and children could be fed a nutritious diet. I know he could, if he chose to. I don't know why he doesn't. Perhaps it is because he wants you and me to do it, or at least for us to bring our five little loaves and two little fishies and become a part of his miracle.

Maybe you do not have much to give; maybe you no longer have the energy or time to race along the hunger path anymore; maybe all you can do is offer a little prayer or bring a little can of corn or peas or whatever you find in the pantry to church each week. But for God's sake and for the sake of his children, who are perishing, do something, anything; just don't do nothing at all! Join in the miracle. Whatever you bring to Jesus he will multiply it beyond the farthest reach of your imagination.

Reach out this week. Help to spread the good news, maybe with just a little jar of jelly, and who knows, you might help to change the world for good, for now and forever more. Amen.