

Psalm 17:1-7, 15, Matthew 14:13-21

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway

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Familiar Miracles and other Gifts of Life

The feeding of the 5000. Other than the resurrection of Christ this is the only miracle story that is recounted in all four of the gospels. In fact, if we include two more stories told again in Matthew and Mark traditionally called ‘the feeding of the *four* thousand’ we have a total of 6 accounts of what scholars believe is probably essentially the same story. Based on this fact alone we know that the early church found this story very important. One not to be missed!

This story of Jesus, and the crowds and the multiplying of loaves and fishes continues to be an important story for us today, for the ways in which it still catches our imaginations and open us to God.

With this in mind I want to take our sermon time this morning to visit this familiar story again. To share with you some of the places it took me this week and invite you to enter into it as well, and see where it takes you. It struck me this week as I reflected on this passage, that often the miracles of Jesus hold a miracle-ness within them that can touch us in new places at every turn. One story can be a new miracle again and again. Even though, maybe especially because, it is so familiar it can have a special ability to capture our imagination.

Where is the miracle in this miracle story for you this day? Where does this story touch your life, come alive for you?

Maybe, for us today this story is all about compassion. Clearly the story, particularly as told by Matthew, shows us the compassion of Jesus. As the story begins, Jesus is attempting to withdraw, take some space and time from the growing demands of his ministry, from the literal and figurative press of the crowds upon him.

As I mentioned, according to Matthew’s version of the story here Jesus had just heard of the violent death of his cousin, John the Baptist. Just before that, he had been run out of his hometown for the things he said and did. As one commentator put it, “In the brief time of his earthly ministry so far, this had not been a season of

affirmation and encouragement for Jesus.”¹ So Jesus is taking some time away, maybe to grieve or to ponder the often frightening violence that pushed on the ministry that was his life and John’s.

But the crowds followed him and instead of taking the time for himself, the story says, he had *compassion* for the people and went and cured their sick. God, who we know in Jesus Christ, is compassionate.

Just this much of the story can be the miracle for us, at times when we need to feel, to receive compassion, as well as when we are called upon to be compassionate. One of the miracles of this story is simply in the realization that God cares for people *where they are*. Jesus addresses the physical realities of sickness as he heals, and later hunger as he feeds the people. The love of the God we come to know through Jesus’ preaching and teaching is not just something to talk about. It is physical and real. God is compassionate.

Maybe for you it is another dimension of this story that touches your heart this day. Maybe for you this is a miracle of hospitality. Part of the Good News of Jesus Christ is that all are welcome. There are no requirements of wealth or education or social status or anything else. The sharp contrast with Herod’s banquet in the story of John the Baptist that is recounted in the verses that precede this story highlights this point. Here, with Jesus, all are welcome and all are fed.

For the early church the recounting of this meal was tied to their celebration of the last supper, their communion, particularly in Matthew’s account. Notice, the words are the same, what still today we use for our communion liturgy. Jesus took the bread and he blessed it and he broke it and he gave it to them and all were filled.

Part of what we celebrate when we celebrate communion is that Jesus Christ came to feed us. To satisfy our hunger for community, for relationship. And this nourishment is for everyone who will take it. Matthew makes the point beautifully. Jesus offers the bread to everyone and there is more than enough to go around. Twelve baskets were filled with leftovers. The hospitality of God – to welcome and to feed is abundant. There is more than enough for everyone. The miracle of the hospitality of Jesus is a wonderful gift *and challenge* for us as we are the body of Christ today.

¹ Jill Duffield, *Looking at the Lectionary for August 8*, Presbyterian Outlook blog July 31, 2017.

Then there is the miracle of what preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor calls ‘learning one’s part in God’s plan’. I think this is the miracle within the miracle that caught me as I read the story this time. It revolves around Jesus’ line to his disciples in this story when he says, “You give them something to eat.” As Jesus walks among the crowd, talking, laying his hands on people, healing the sick the disciples notice that it is getting late. They do the logical and practical thing and suggest that Jesus tell the people that this is enough and it is time to go home. Jesus says, ‘no, they do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.’”

You give them something to eat. Jesus calls on them. Their first response is, “no, not possible. We’ve got 5 loaves and 2 fish and a very large crowd.” Then Jesus works a miracle.

There are several explanations for what happens next. Some understand that the bread appeared among the crowd like the manna in the desert did for the Israelites as they wandered with Moses. Others see this as a sacramental meal shared by Jesus’ followers, with bits of bread shared, something like our communion meals today that was later interpreted as a miracle feast.

Then there are those who say what really happened is that when the disciples, or in the case of the gospel writer, John’s version, the young child, shared what little they had, others were moved to share and there was more than enough.

Then there are also some commentators who say that in fact there was never actually an event like this in the life of Jesus, but this is really a symbolic representation of the meaning of the whole Christ-event. That this is really a picture story to show us vividly how God, through the person of Jesus Christ, comes to meet human need, with the important underlying themes of fellowship, community and plenty for all.²

However we interpret it, there remains the idea that Jesus calls upon his disciples to *do* something here. There is the miracle of call and response. As commentator Eugene Boring puts it, God is the source of the miracle and the resources are human.³ God is the source of the miracle and the resources are human.

The disciples learn that they have a part in the work of God. They take what Jesus gives them and they feed the people and, to their amazement I am sure, there is

² Boring, Eugene. *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8. Pg. 326.

³ *ibid.*

more than enough. God calls and believers, and even doubters, respond and miracles happen. To learn our part in God's plan, to be willing to respond when God says to us, "you give them something to eat" is a miracle too.

Where is the miracle for you today? What part of this story catches you and reminds you of the miracle of God present in your life right now? Is it compassion? The compassion you *receive* at the hands of some one who is being God present in your life right now? Or the compassion you are *offering* through a ministry to which you are being called? Is it hospitality as you are accepted and loved by some one you least expect? Or the hospitality you discover within yourself when you find the courage to stretch out your hand or heart to some one who stirred fear or hostility in you before.

Or is the miracle somewhere in your life where you are learning your part in God's plan. Maybe new today from yesterday.

May we be a-tuned to the miracles in our lives - God at work around us, in us and through us. Thanks be to God.