

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, JULY 29, 2018, AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH,
BETHANY BEACH, DE

Three burly fellows on huge motorcycles pulled up to a highway cafe where a truck driver, just a little guy, was perched on a stool quietly eating his lunch. As the three fellows came in, they spotted him, grabbed his food away from him and laughed in his face. The truck driver said nothing. He got up, paid for his food and walked out. One of the three cyclists, unhappy that they hadn't succeeded in provoking the little [guy] into a fight commented to the waitress: "Boy, he sure wasn't much of a man, was he?" The waitress replied, "Well, I guess not." Then, looking out the window, she added, "I guess he's not much of a truck driver, either. He just ran over three motorcycles."ⁱ

That old statement "never judge a book by its cover" comes to mind as I ponder anew the humor in that little story. I'm also reminded that old stories are made new again in the telling and by what thought processes they're linked to. So once again we this week begin five Sundays with the focus on Christ as the bread of life, a portion we had skipped over last week in the *Gospel of Mark*. Instead we move on to the *Gospel of John*, where the particular emphasis of the reading for today might be that Christ walks on water toward us to feed us.ⁱⁱ Yet before he performs this miracle, he feeds approximately 5000 on Passover with five small barley loaves and two small fish. It is said to be a miracle because no matter how many people were actually present, all were fed with some left over - - kind of like an Italian mother's Sunday meal! Twelve baskets (the symbolic number of completion) were filled with the bread leftovers (notice there were no fish left, though. I'm not sure what that means...) After he performs this miracle, he has to steal away from the crowd as he realizes that they would press to make him king, which was not part of his agenda. So he withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

It is such a simple story, given only 13 verses in *John*, yet it has come to have a much deeper meaning for the church. Our communion service is partially based on the happenings of this tale and in other churches it has strong sacramental meaning (in other words, it is a story that is greatly revered and told in separate passages to allow us to understand the early church's growing sense of importance of the weekly assembly meal.ⁱⁱⁱ) Yet simple as it is there are some profound theological implications to what Jesus does that we should pause and look at to comprehend the full meaning of what is being offered up here.

The first thing we should note is that John calls the feeding of the 5000 one of "the signs" that Jesus performs. Signs (also known as miracles) are important in that they point to other things we need to be looking for in the story, namely not the number of folks that were fed, nor that they were even particularly hungry, but that they were looking for healing. He came and brought it to them with a meal (which is why we do so

on Sundays also). It is the group experience with him that makes the difference, what we call the spirit of community. I'm not sure that you've ever thought of the communion in this way, but it is meant to be for us a sign of God's healing in the world when all can come together to share of its benefits. That is why we welcome everyone at our table regardless of their denominational background or faith, so that little by little with these small steps of sharing bread and wine our differences are minimalized and our friendships are increased. Sharing this meal with each other is probably the most important thing we as Christians do all week. That is why it is so important to be at church when you can and are able. With each attendee participating in the worship service the kingdom of God breaks through stronger, and healing comes to us, one and for all as well as those we pray for. That is not to say that God is not present to the world in any case, but when we are present to God we receive the gift of a renewed life constantly. I don't know about you, but I look forward to those resurrections. I need them and cherish that they are given to me merely through Divine participation in the word and communion we share.

The second thing we should note is that this feeding takes place on a mountaintop. Mountaintops were where people encountered God (think of Moses and the Ten Commandments and The Transfiguration of Jesus.) Our weekly communion is meant to be a top-of-the-mountain event which means it is where we encounter God unlike in any other space or experience. You've heard preachers use this metaphor, namely Martin Luther King, Jr., in his famous speech the night before he was assassinated. The language is seen by some as a "prophetic" analogy. King was referring to events described in the Biblical book of *Deuteronomy*. In it, Moses is the leader of the people of Israel, who follow him to life in a Promised Land. Before they reach it however, Moses is informed by God that, because of an incident in which he did not follow God's directions, he will not reach the land himself, but will only see it from a distance. Shortly after, Moses dies, and his successor Joshua leads them into the Promised Land. Toward the end of the speech, King refers to threats against his life and uses language that seems to foreshadow his impending death, and the likelihood of his inability to finish all he had begun, still reaffirming that he was not afraid to die:

"Well, I don't know what will happen now," he said. "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live - a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may

not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*^{iv} Seeing how this text speaks to us today, do you not agree we need someone with mountaintop experience to enter the political arena? I pray, Lord, that whoever it is may come to comfort the many and assuage our fears, for what good is sharing a meal if we cannot talk with each other and work to make things whole? Lord, lead us to the mountaintop where we can hear leaders speak wise words of truth, truth based in reality! O God be with us!

The third thing we note about this story is “this not a lesson in sharing, as others have suggested. This is NOT the story of a young boy who sets an example of generosity that inspires the rest of the crowd to share their food which turns out to be adequate for the occasion. This IS a story—one of many in both Old and New Testaments—about God’s/Jesus’ ability to transform too little into more than enough.”^v

Attempts to explain this story by rationalistic or humanistic interpretations only diminish it—shrinking the miracle to fit our vision instead of expanding our vision to see God’s majesty. We must ask why some interpreters find it possible to believe in the miracle of the resurrection but not the miracle of the loaves and fishes...?^{vi} It’s folly to try to interpret the whole of the text as fairy tale - - so much is lost when one does. This does not mean, however, that the gospel does not serve as a great allegory or metaphor for what we are to grasp and hold on to. Miracles are possible (I’ve seen a few in my life), as all things are possible with God. Our belief in them does not make them more true; it does, I believe, make them more real for those who depend on them. They say that the miracle of Christmas was not that a child was born but that Mary believed, believed in all that had been revealed to her, in all the prophecies about the babe she held in her arms, believed not only in all that he was but also in all that he could and would be. God help my unbelief!

Getting back to this morning’s gospel, after feeding the 5000 men, plus women and children (so there *were* more than just 5000 present), he and the disciples move on, he to another mountain, they to the lake on the way to Capernaum. The text takes just six

verses to tell one of the most famous miracle stories, that of Jesus walking on water to the boat. There is a standard preacher's joke that goes with this tale.

Three monks decided to practice meditation together. They sat by the side of a lake and closed their eyes in concentration. Then suddenly, the first one stood up and said, "I forgot my mat." He stepped miraculously onto the water in front of him and walked across the lake to their hut on the other side.

When he returned, the second monk stood up and said, "I forgot to put my other underwear to dry." He too walked calmly across the water and returned the same way. The third monk watched the first two carefully in what he decided must be the test of his own abilities. "Is your learning so superior to mine? I too can match any feat you two can perform," he declared loudly and rushed to the water's edge to walk across it. He promptly fell into the deep water. Undeterred, the monk climbed out of the water and tried again, only to sink into the water. Yet again he climbed out and yet again he tried, each time sinking into the water. This went on for some time as the other two monks watched. After a while, the second monk turned to the first and said, "Do you think we should tell him where the stones are?"^{vii}

We know the joke and can accept its humor because it's easier to consume and make sense of it, if like the bread and fish story, we trivialize it. Unless, of course, we take it in the context I suggested at the start of this sermon, that Christ walks across the water towards us so that we might be fed. Fed what, and how? We have already been fed the miraculous meal, but we might be willing to accept it as hungry people instead of people hungry for the Spirit. It's night time and quite dark on the lake. Jesus walking toward them most likely seemed like an apparition of some sort. They don't know who or what it is that is coming towards them, until he speaks, and then chooses to do so in an unconventional way, using God language, *eigo emi* (It is I, God). Jesus, multiplying food and now walking on water, proclaims by his words and actions that he is surely the "Supreme Authority" of all the universe. His disciples didn't know what to expect next. Abandoning their earthly pursuits; they followed wherever he led and experienced one miracle after another. And that is what we are called to do as well - - follow the miracles.

There was a book out a few years ago that was very popular and still is within the peace movement. Published by the Foundation for Inner Peace, it is known as *A Course in Miracles*, a self-study spiritual thought system that teaches the way to Universal Love

through Forgiveness written by Helen Schucman. It claims to assist its readers in achieving spiritual transformation. The underlying premise of the work is the teaching that the greatest "miracle" that one may achieve in one's life is the act of simply gaining a full "awareness of love's presence."^{viii} Despite its popularity with millions of copies sold, it has like other books of this self-help genre, many detractors. I bring it to you this morning because I believe it demonstrates what the gospels seek do, which is to transform us via their stories and the spiritual elements of the nature of the Word itself, Christ who is at the forefront and is the bearer of the good news. *A Course in Miracles* may not comply with the expectations of its critics, but to me it demonstrates that there is a hunger, the kind present at the feeding of the 5000 and on the lake that night, that is only sated by interaction with the Divine. We need it, we yearn for it and we'll go to great lengths, even in our unbelief, to experience it.

The spiritual writer Jay Oord says "Of course, I don't think all claims about miracles are legitimate. Some are hoaxes, wishful thinking, the effects of hysteria, or coincidences. But I do think some miracles actually occur, and those of us who believe in God need to account for them if we are to witness well to hope that we have in God."^{ix}

"In addition," Ord writes, "to being unexpected and good, miracles involve special divine action. I believe that the special divine action that makes miracles possible occurs when God provides new possibilities, forms, structures, or ways of being to creatures."^x In other words, we should continue to believe because we ain't seen nothin' yet!

Or consider the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, who writes "People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of

a child—our own two eyes. All is a miracle.”^{xi}

So look, see, taste, hear, feel. The universe has been put here for us to experience.

Enjoy the fruits of its discovery, the miracle of life!

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.

Pastor, BBCC

ⁱ <https://www.jesussite.com/resources/jokes/>

ⁱⁱ Sunday and Seasons: Preaching Year B, p.211.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I%27ve_Been_to_the_Mountaintop

^v <https://www.sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary/john-61-21/>

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} <http://www.laughitout.com/2008/10/walking-on-water.html>

^{viii} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Course_in_Miracles

^{ix} http://thomasjayoord.com/index.php/blog/archives/does_it_make_sense_to_believe_in_miracles

^x *Ibid.*

^{xi} Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation*