

Sermon, August 2, 2020

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome our good friends and St. Mark's music directors Debi and Sean Beachy, who will provide special music.

We are still waiting for a safe time to resume regular public worship. Pandemic cases are at an all-time high nationally, and many, if not most of our members are either in a high-risk group, or they spend time with friends and family members who are. We do not want to endanger any of them unnecessarily, so please bear with us. If you would like to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult and unprecedented times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is stmarksoakland.com (no spaces or caps)

Meanwhile we have reopened the Adult Forum on a virtual online basis. We are discussing Race and Racism in America, and in the Church. If you are interested, call the church office and we will send you the link. You can participate even without internet access if you have a smart phone or a friend or family member who does. If you are not sure how, call the office.

Now today's stupid joke. I've told you my big high school reunion this year was canceled, so I've been calling former classmates just to touch base. I talked to an old friend yesterday and asked, "How are you doing?" And she said, "Not great. We had to cancel our annual trip to Hawaii this year because of Covid 19." And I said, "Sorry." She said, "Most years we cancel because it is too expensive."

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray.

Glorious God, your generosity waters the world with goodness, and you cover creation with abundance. Awaken in us a hunger for the food that satisfies both body and spirit, and with this food fill all the starving world; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.

A reading from Isaiah, the fifty-fifth chapter.

Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the fourteenth chapter.

Now when Jesus heard [about the beheading of John the Baptist], he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.

When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."

And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of Wisdom, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

The first time I preached on this particular gospel reading was July 31, 2005. And right after I read the part that says, "Jesus withdrew from there in a boat..." I turned to Laura and said, "See...Jesus had a boat." And the rest is history.

It's a new month and we're finished with parables for a while. The next couple of weeks we'll be talking instead about probably my LEAST favorite preaching topic: Miracles. Let me explain.

There are a lot of "miracle stories" in the gospels—64 in fact, if you count parallel versions of the same incident. What we commonly call miracles, in the original New Testament Greek are called "te^ra^ta," meaning "wonders." Or "duⁿa^meⁱj"—meaning, "deeds of power," or sometimes simply "er^ga," a word that means "works."

The Gospel of John refers to miracles as 'si^meⁱa,' meaning "signs." And I actually prefer that term because somebody else's miracle doesn't necessarily mean much to me two thousand years later and half a world away; except maybe as a sign that points to a timeless truth or a hidden reality that the miracle reveals. Of course it's not always easy to figure out exactly what that is.

The miracles of Jesus include exorcisms, dramatic healings, raising people from the dead, and controlling and manipulating nature. Today's miracle, the Feeding of the Five Thousand, is one of the so-called "provision" miracles. It is the ONLY miracle story that appears in all four gospels.

Other provision miracles include changing water into wine and spectacular catches of fish. In all, the gospels contain six accounts of miraculous mass feedings and they all sound a lot like each other.

Scholars think that even though the details differ slightly, they're probably all based on the same remarkable incident. Sure, Jesus could have conjured up miracle food more than once. But it's unlikely the disciples would have been skeptical and surprised the second or third time around, and they always seem to be. The fact that this one story was handed down through six separate traditions tells me it was an important teaching for the early church.

And that fact also proves that something absolutely amazing really DID happen on that day, even if I'm not so certain about the "what" the "how," or the "why."

Jesus is not the only biblical character credited with miracles. God the Creator executed some directly, others were mediated through angels; still others through Moses and prophets like Elijah and Elisha. The apostles, missionaries and model Christians got into the act in the Book of Acts. As did a couple of less-than-exemplary figures.

Truth is Jesus' miracles don't sound a whole lot different from those of other biblical characters, or for that matter other religious figures of both history and legend.

Elijah and Elisha had their own miraculous feedings. In the collection of ancient rabbinic writings known as the Talmud, Rabbi Gamaliel is said to have calmed a storm with just a wave of his hand. Legendary rabbis have also been credited with healing the sick and raising the dead. The distinctive thing about Jesus for early Christians was NOT that he performed miracles as if nobody else ever had.

In the first century New Testament world, miracles were presumed and accepted as fact. They were ascribed to all kinds of folk, good and bad; divine and very human. What surprises me is that in the Bible you don't always have to ask for a miracle to get one. And there doesn't seem to be any consistent relationship between miracles and faith.

Neither necessarily leads to the other. Back then as well as today, faithful people don't always experience miracles, even when they pray for them.

As you may know by now, I'm a science guy and a former health care practitioner, and I don't really know what to make of miracle stories. Not because I DON'T believe in them, but because contrary to everything I know about science and nature, I kind of DO believe in

them. I just don't understand how and why they happen, or what they're supposed to mean. And apparently, I'm not alone.

Some think the purpose of the Feeding of the Five Thousand was to point us backwards. Maybe back to when God first miraculously fed Israel manna and quail in the Sinai wilderness. Perhaps this miracle was meant to prove the divinity of Jesus, or as he later put it that "the father and I are one."

Or maybe since Elijah and especially Elisha had performed similar deeds, the purpose of this story was to reveal Jesus as a great prophet and "man of God" just like they were.

Others think this story points forward, not backwards. They note that today Jesus took bread, blessed it, then broke and distributed it, prefiguring the Last Supper that we Christians commemorate and celebrate as Holy Communion to this day.

That's what fellow Lutheran Albert Schweitzer thought. Schweitzer, as you probably know, was a renowned philosopher, church musician, theologian, organist, physician and Nobel Peace Prize winning philanthropist.

The son of a Lutheran pastor, Dr. Schweitzer was quite convinced that Holy Communion WAS the real point of this particular miracle story. Of course he was also a scientist, physician and medical missionary, so like us other science guys he also sought a more natural and logical explanation for exactly what happened to the loaves and the fish.

Schweitzer wondered if maybe Jesus handed out only very small pieces of food to the crowd, like the way we distribute communion these days. He thought maybe when the text says the people "were filled," it wasn't so much referring to their bellies but to their spirits--filled to overflowing by the sacred act of communing with Jesus himself.

Of course, there have always been skeptics. Some wonder if Jesus filled a nearby cave with provisions ahead of time in anticipation of this event. Then he and the disciples set about sneaking food from the secret stash to wow the crowd. But I hardly think this story was a sacred sleight of hand or holy hoax.

Personally, I'm intrigued by the theory of another scientifically-oriented Lutheran, a guy named Heinrich Paulus.

Like Schweitzer, he was also the son of a Lutheran pastor. And Paulus was a late eighteenth and early nineteenth century professor of religion and theology at the University of Heidelberg.

Living at the height of the Age of Enlightenment, Paulus was a rationalist who was always perplexed by the Bible's miracle stories. Rationalists use reason as the main criteria for interpreting scripture, and tend to be skeptical of all things supernatural.

Their critics claim they tend to deny divine power and all things metaphysical. I'm probably somewhere in-between. I don't think God is in any way limited by the rules of nature or reason, but instead usually chooses to work within them.

Paulus wondered if maybe for centuries we have been reading this particular story all wrong. He thought perhaps it was the huge crowd that day that had undergone the miraculous transformation. What if the people were changed, instead of the loaves and fish?

Paulus noticed that Matthew mentions women and children in addition to the five thousand men. That would mean the crowd probably numbered fifteen-to-twenty thousand people in all, mostly made up of families.

Parents I know would never venture out for a day-long excursion with no thought to the needs of the kids. Young-uns DO get hungry, after all. And back then you couldn't just hit the drive-through for a Happy Meal.

Paulus thought the parents probably stashed away a few loaves and fishes for themselves and their kids for the day. But once they witnessed the loving care and selfless-giving of Jesus, who was clearly willing to share everything he had—maybe that’s when the miracle really happened.

Maybe people were so inspired by Jesus’ selfless compassion that they reached deep into their own pockets and bags with a sudden willingness to share all that **THEY** had too. And not only with their friends and neighbors, but even complete strangers who maybe didn’t come so prepared.

In the presence of the Lord who treated them all as his own brothers and sisters, maybe they realized--wait a minute—we **ARE** all family here, aren’t we?—and as such we need to look out for and provide for each other.

Why all the leftovers? Truth is, when people are willing to share, all **CAN** eat their fill, with plenty left over. And we shouldn’t be surprised if some packed more food than they really needed for the day’s outing. **MY** mother always did.

When it comes to miracles I can’t imagine that any sleight of hand, or mysterious provision would stack up favorably against a *duna me i j* or “deed of power” quite like this one.

Especially if it **IS** the story of twenty thousand people who, in the presence of the Lord, had a change of heart.

And if you are wondering if their faith led to the miracle, or if the miracle led to their faith, the way I read it, the miracle **WAS** their faith. Faith, that is, in action.

Perhaps that’s the nature of most of the miracles we experience in today’s world. There is certainly no shortage of fellow human beings who are poor, or sick or hungry. Or people made desperate or terrified

by a pandemic. If we want to remember and honor the Jesus who gave everything, we can't just say, "Go for it God, let the miracles begin."

Instead as inspired people of faith we need to ask, "What can we do? Food? No problem. Medicine? That too. Peace? Let's try."

If professor Paulus had it right, in today's story, "God magically provides" was never the point. Instead Jesus was saying, "Look, I'm not in charge of this sort of thing, you are. It's not my bread that your neighbor needs, it's yours. And not just in some distant wilderness past. In the right here and the right now..."

Because much like the twenty-thousand that day in Bethsaida, thirty-seven million Americans will go to bed hungry tonight. Thirty-five thousand of the world's children will die tomorrow of malnutrition and preventable diseases, even though we have the food and we have the medicine that could save them.

So let's check our own pockets and look through our own bags. And not just PRAY for miracles. But instead, be a part of one.

Amen
