

Among So Many People

by

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John 6:1-15

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ²A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷Philip answered him, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” ⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ⁹“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” ¹⁰Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹²When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” ¹³So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

¹⁵When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Some of you may have heard me tell this story in the past, but in the six years of ministry that I have been privileged to share with you all here at Bryn Mawr it continues to be one of my favorites. It happened a few years ago, when my good colleague Rachel invited me to spend a Sunday morning with our Fourth and Fifth Sunday school class. Maybe some of you have been invited to spend time with BPMC Fourth and Fifth graders as well. It is in that year that Rachel helps them to explore what it means to be a church and what it means to be a member of our church. They meet with Elders and Deacons, Facilities staff have been known to take them into the bowels of the sanctuary to see the inner workings of our buildings, they have even met with different church members who have unique perspectives on how their identity as members of this church and as Christians carries through to their professions as doctors, teachers, and community leaders.

Rachel brings me in, along with other dedicated members of our mission committees to talk about how mission is connected to our identity as Christians and even our unique identity as members and leaders of Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church. One year, part of those conversations meant assisting students as they researched some of our mission partners and the work that they do in Philadelphia and around the world. That particular year the Richard Shaull award, a grant given out by our Worldwide Ministries Council in honor of the rich mission legacy of Dick Shaull supporting transformational community work, was given to a sister Presbyterian congregation located in North Carolina - simply called Farm Church. Farm Church folks will tell you that they are a church that meets on a farm and leverages the resources of the farm to address food insecurity in Durham. The students were fascinated by this concept, and inspired by their witness. When the small group researching farm church reported back to their class, they suggested that we might consider taking all of the open lawn that we have available to us here in front of our church on Montgomery Ave and turn that into our own garden - our own farm - so that we too could grow food to feed people.

Because I know that we as a congregation take pride in our church facilities, and understand the responsibility the physical witness our church buildings and campus provide to the local community, I asked them a simple question. “What will people driving down Montgomery past our church think if they saw we had turned our beautiful lawn into a farm?” Without missing a beat, one of them responded, “People would think we are a church who knows what they are doing.”

Every time I read John's version of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, I think of that Sunday school class with our 4th and 5th graders. It is the only version of the familiar miracle story that includes the detail of a young boy bringing forward the five loaves and two fish that will miraculously feed the hungry crowd.

In the midst of the disciples scrambling to know what to do, how to respond, where to look for help, overwhelmed by the enormity of the problem and not sure of their part in solving it, it is a child who makes it all very simple and obvious - here is some food, maybe we could give it to the people. Let's give them the impression that we know what we are doing. In this moment the practical encounters the miraculous and somehow the people encounter the abundance and mercy of God.

I know that some of us have a hard time wrapping our heads around the miracle stories that we encounter not just in the Gospels but throughout the Bible. We ask questions about why miracles seem to be in shorter supply these days or even why God or Jesus saw fit to perform somewhat odd miracles, like walking on water or stilling a storm.

Our favorite thing to do with a miracle like the Feeding of the Five Thousand is to come up with a simple and rational explanation for what might have actually happened if the story took place in a world that obeys the laws of science, like the laws surrounding the conservation of matter. The world in which we live today. Food can't come from nowhere. We all know that. So we assume maybe that the men women and children gathered on that day really did have food with them, but it took just one person - like that young boy - to make a public act of generosity for others to also be abundantly generous.

Biblical scholar Luke Timothy Johnson, in a recent book just focusing on miracles, challenges us to not read or hear these miracle stories through the lens of our physical experience of our world but through the imagined (but never imaginary) world of scripture.

He writes, "Scripture imagines a world as created by and ordered to, cared for and saved by, a God who is at once infinitely powerful and infinitely personal; a world in which this God creates humans in God's own image, with capacities for

knowledge and love, pleasure and freedom; a world that is imagined as a garden that God plants for humans to enjoy and cultivate. Nothing about this imagined world is empirically verifiable. But by imagining the world that Scripture imagines, humans can receive and engage in their own world as God's new creation."¹

So we are called to suspend our disbelief and imagine a world in which through the compassion of Jesus Christ and the power of God, that something did come from nothing. That through the work of the Holy Spirit, one plus one sometimes equals three. That the presence of God in the world is bigger than the sum of all of the parts of God that we can understand. That miracles are real.

In her now classic memoir, *Take This Bread*, Sara Miles recounts the parallel journeys she went on in wrestling with existence of miracles - one to reclaim a lost faith and identity as a Christian and a member of a Christian community and the other to feed the most vulnerable in greater San Francisco. In these journeys, she pushes back against the idea that there was something miraculous happening in the growing work that she was doing as she established first one and then several food cupboards sponsored by her Episcopal congregation of St. Gregory. When they received a windfall of a \$200,000 grant from the city in recognition of the growth and importance of their work, they sat down as leaders of the pantries and congregation to discern and really reaffirm what their work was all about. Was it about faith, about generosity, about simply feeding the hungry? In a moment of communal prayer and silence they sat together to discern where they were being called. One of the participants asked Sarah directly, "What are you hungry for?"

Sarah writes, "I had no idea how to answer. Suddenly I reached over to the little table where we'd set up our coffee and snacks and picked up a piece of panettone, studded with raisins and citrus peel. I held it out to her, "this", I said, and I knew I meant it. Not just the panettone but the gesture of offering: my hand reaching out, Lynn's hand reaching out and the sweet bread between us.

This was the hunger that first drew me to the Table at St. Gregory's. It was the same hunger that drew parents to the pantry to get groceries and brought them back to blurt out help or thank you or some other real word. It was the hunger of the volunteers, with their yearning for jokes, company, lunch, and work to do. It was

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Miracles: God's Presence and Power in Creation*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2018.

the hunger of everyone who gave us dollar bills, cans of hominy, apples from their backyard and huge checks. It was a hunger that had to do with the bodies of strangers, with offering everything we had, giving away control and receiving what we needed to live.”²

Some biblical scholars will argue that it is unsophisticated to read the story of the *Feeding of the Five Thousand* as a miracle about hunger. Just fifteen verses later in this same chapter in John, Jesus tells the disciples to not focus on food that perishes but to strive for the food that endures for eternal life, and even calls himself the Bread of Life. This is a miracle about the power of God, not about people being hungry, they would say.

It is true that the folks in this story are pilgrims, on their way to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. They are gathered to be close to Jesus, which meant that they weren't close to a convenient place to grab lunch. In this miracle Jesus grabs their attention so that they can focus on the significance of his presence, the meaning of his message, and the assurance that he is offering in eternal life.

And yet, I am confident that were Jesus here with us today in the face of the rising food insecurity crisis in our nation and in greater Philadelphia, he would ask us just as he asked his disciples, “What are you going to do to feed these hungry people?”

The national non-profit Feeding America notes that in 2019 before the start of the pandemic - more than 35 million people including 11 million children were food insecure, that it is likely that last year in the heart of the pandemic that those numbers rose by 10 million. Even into 2021 they project that at least 42 million people will continue to experience food insecurity in the United States. Just in Philadelphia, they project that the food insecurity rate among children in 2021 will rise to 29%. Local organizations in Philadelphia like Philabundance and Share, two large-scale food programs, both reported a 60% increase in the food they've distributed since the start of pandemic.

For over forty years, being a part of this congregation has meant prioritizing the needs of the hungry, to answer the call to feed the hungry, and to support

²Sara Miles, *Take This Bread*. Balentine Books, 2008.

organizations that are also working against the root causes of food insecurity in communities around our region. Over the course of the pandemic our partners in the fight against hunger have experienced this same expansion of their work as the impact of the pandemic compounded a food insecurity crisis that they have been working against for years.

We have shared in a few places what our hunger ministries have looked like here at BMPC during the pandemic, but it wasn't until I sat with our text from John this morning that I wondered what it would mean to use the language of miracles when we tell the story of who we have been and who we are as a church over this past year.

Let me start by saying that one of the enduring qualities of this congregation is our generosity. It is a sign of faith and trust in our leaders, a sign of our unity in vision and mission, as well as a sign of the abundant resources that our congregation has at its disposal.

For the past several years, members of this church have given generously to the BMPC Hunger Fund - giving an average of \$60,000 each year. Those funds are distributed thoughtfully by the Hunger committee to around 18 different organizations in our area who's work ranges from direct services to the unhoused to community food cupboards, work with new mothers to the development of community gardens and community led farmer's markets.

Once we realized the economic impact the pandemic would take on the most vulnerable communities, the Hunger Committee began to contact our partners to find out how their operations were changing and expanding and how we could best support them. And we began helping you all have even more convenient ways to give to the Hunger Fund, especially while we were apart.

Meeting for a while twice a month, the Hunger Committee committed to distributing your donations almost as quickly as they were collected.

It didn't all come in one miraculous check, but slowly and consistently throughout 2020, the Hunger budget which anticipated pre-pandemic donations of around \$60,000 swelled to almost \$140,000. Partners received double if not more

than they planned from us last year. I can remember meetings where donations had been so large in the preceding month, that the committee was able to approve \$1,000 bonus donations for each partner organization trusting that donations would continue to come in throughout the rest of the year.

Now, you can argue that this wasn't really a miracle. Nothing was created out of thin air. People gave from their resources in response to a clearly defined need that we communicated consistently through announcements, emails, sermons and our website. We made it easier to give online, and when it is easier to give, people give. Because of the thoughtful work of our Hunger Committee and long relationships with our partners it wasn't hard to know how to make your donations have the greatest impact. There is little mystery to what happened or how it happened.

And yet, there was something in it that felt to me like a miracle. Because in so many other places of our life as a church last year, it felt like we had no idea what we were doing. But not when it came to our work on behalf of the hungry - in that thing, just like our 4th and 5th graders said - it felt like we knew what we were doing. People were hungry and in partnership with innovative and nimble, committed and faithful partners, you gave them something to eat.

Maybe it was a miracle of generosity rather than a miracle of metaphysics. Maybe it was a miracle about the need and hunger we all experienced last year - a hunger to be helpful, to serve others, to somehow share the grace that most of us have been given in this life to those who the pandemic showed us live right on the edge of survival one lost paycheck away from being able to feed their families. This past year practical encountered the miraculous and the people encountered the abundance and mercy of God.

This is not a sentiment of pride but an expression of gratitude. Not an acknowledgment of work that has been completed but a recognition that the boundaries of what we are capable of are likely broader than we had imagined.

It is my hope that something new was created within us that is bigger than the sum of all of these parts. That if this past year has taught us anything, it is that we have the capacity and the resources to be extravagantly generous, that this

community is a place where we can be nurtured in that identity, and build relationships shaped by a priority for service and for giving.

That among so many people, we have more than we need already to reflect the love and compassion of Christ in this world of God's abundant creation. Amen