

Wesley United Methodist Church

August 2, 2020

The Problem with Miracles

Scripture: Matthew 14:13-21

A colleague of mine from the Mid-East told a story about a time when he was on a long train ride in that area. The train had two seats facing two seats so that they were essentially in groups of four. It appeared that in his group they were all strangers and mostly sat there not speaking. He had prepared well for the long trip and had packed his lunch. As lunch time approached, he grew hungry but resisted getting his lunch.

As he explained, in his culture it would be unthinkable to eat his food without sharing with the other people seated near him. He didn't really have enough to share so he simply waited and waited and waited. About midafternoon when his hunger was becoming unbearable, he finally decided that having even a few bites of his lunch was better than having nothing at all. Having decided to share his small lunch with the other three people, he reached for his food.

As soon as he did so, the other three people all did exactly the same. They had all come prepared. They all had a lunch with them and all of them had been reluctant to take their lunch out because they each felt that they did not have enough to share but were also unwilling to violate the strong behavioral standards of politeness in their culture. They had a good laugh and they all enjoyed their lunch.¹ He told this story to illustrate one understanding of the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000.

Another colleague suggested to the congregation where she was pastor, that perhaps people had food in their pockets and once food started to be passed out that everyone brought out of their pockets the food they had brought with them. People in the church where she was serving became very angry and accused her of not believing the Bible because she did not take the story as literal truth. For some of them there is no way to believe this story except for it to be a miracle of strict multiplication where the food that Jesus blessed miraculously multiplied as it was passed around.

I wasn't there. I don't know exactly what happened and I don't know how to explain it. And, guess what? I'm okay with that. Could Jesus have miraculously

caused the small amount of food to multiply so that a very large crowd could have had not only enough to eat but more than enough, so much so that 12 baskets of leftover food were collected? Yes, I believe Jesus could have done that. Could Jesus' blessing of the food and beginning to share it be enough so that people then reached into their pockets and pulled out the food they had brought with them and began to share it with others? Yes, I believe that could also have been the case and I don't think that this would be any less of a miracle.

By the way, before we get hung up on the number 5,000, remember that the gospels say 5,000 men, plus women and children. So the likelihood is that the crowd was closer to 10 or 15,000 people. And I invite those of us who are parents to think back to when our children were small. Did we go anywhere without taking some snacks with us? I didn't – and often still don't.

We are also talking a remote area without a grocery store or small market on every corner. People typically made sure that they had food with them when they traveled anywhere. But I'm not going to get into a debate about how this miracle took place. Clearly whatever happened was important enough that people kept telling the stories and this event was one of the few that made it into all four of our gospels. Matthew, Mark and Luke tell it in similar ways but John has the addition of a small boy who offered the 5 small loaves and 2 fish that he had with him to the disciples to help feed the crowd. A young boy, willing to share what he had – to me, that is another miracle.

Miracles are great, but they also present a bit of a problem to many of us. You see, we often want to understand why and how something happened, and miracles don't give us answers. But there is another issue, miracles allow us to focus only on God's responsibility and allow us to forget our own responsibility. They appeal to the part of us that is all too happy to let God take care of feeding the crowd or saving the world. They appeal to the part of us that is all too happy to let God do it all while we sit back.ⁱⁱ

When the disciples came to Jesus and suggested that he send the crowd away because it was getting late and they needed to find some food, Jesus could have simply agreed with them and told people that he was done talking, healing, and interacting with

them. It would have been understandable under any circumstances, but especially so in this case.

You see, this passage begins, “Now when Jesus heard this”. Heard what? According to Matthew, Jesus had just been told that his cousin John, the one we call the Baptizer had been murdered by Herod Antipas at the request of a girl who had danced for him at his birthday party.

Matthew tells us that when Jesus heard this, he withdrew by boat to a deserted place. He needed time to himself. He needed time to process this news. He needed time to grieve. But the crowd heard where he was going and followed him, so that when he went ashore, a crowd had already gathered. Rather than send them away, rather than tell them he needed to be alone, rather than get angry with the, rather than feel put upon, Matthew says that he had compassion for them and he cured their sick.

After spending many hours healing them and taking care of their needs, it would certainly be understandable if Jesus emotional and physical resources were depleted. It would have been understandable if he had told them to leave, but he didn't.

Instead, he said to the disciples, “They don't need to go away. You give them something to eat.”

The disciples saw what we often see. They saw the scarcity of their resources. They protested that they had only five loaves and two fish – not really even enough to feed themselves. But Jesus told them to bring the food to him. He told the crowd to sit down, and he blessed the food, broke the loaves, gave them to his disciples and they began to share them with the crowd. After all ate and were filled, they collected what was left over, and filled twelve baskets.

I believe that Jesus tells us the same thing he told the disciples. You feed them. Like the disciples, we too often see the scarcity. We don't believe we have enough resources to do whatever it is that needs to be done. We don't have enough resources to solve those really big problems, and they all seem like big problems.

But Jesus tells them, and tells us, “Bring it to me”. Whatever resources we have, we are to bring to Jesus and Jesus blesses those resources and somehow through a miracle of multiplication our resources are multiplied and can accomplish great things.

There is a story told about a student who one day in prayer, said to God, “There are so many problems in this world. People are hungry. People don’t have enough clothes or places to live or jobs. What a mess. You are supposed to be the creator, but this is a mess. Even I could do better than this.” His prayer of complaint and lament was answered with a simple reply, “That’s what you are supposed to do.”

When people bring their medical knowledge together and bring it to God, God blesses it, ideas are fertilized and multiplied and new treatments are developed for illnesses and hopefully in the near future a vaccine for Covid 19. Isn’t that also a miracle? When civil rights activists share stories and awaken awareness in others and people start to change their attitudes and understanding, isn’t that also a miracle? I think that God works miracles in so many ways every day and most of them involve us – most of them involve us using the gifts and talents and abilities that God has given us and putting them together with others so that together we are able to do far more than any of us can do on our own.

One of our great gifts as a church is to be able to participate in God’s miracles, to be the hands and feet of God doing what needs to be done. I want to share with you one small miracle that happens right here in our community every month. During Covid 19, we have become partners with the Northern RI Food Pantry and collect a different food item each month. We began by collecting pancake mix and syrup, and then tuna fish. Now we are collecting canned fruit and next month we will be collecting cereal.

The cans that each of us bring in may not seem like they could go far or make a dent in the hunger of people in our area, but when mine are added to yours and ours are added to what someone else brings, God blesses them and they become a miracle. I want to invite you now to watch a [video interview](#) with a representative of the food pantry.

There is more to this interview and you can find the full interview, about 5 minutes long, on our Facebook page or on our website. But what I especially wanted you to see right now is the affirmation that about 1,000 people are being fed every month through donations that may not seem large to any of us, but which when brought

together are just as miraculous as the feeding of the multitude we heard about this morning.

Did you see the view of all the food spread out as they prepare the boxes and bags for delivery? Could you hear the voices of volunteers in the background packing the food? My donations may not seem like a lot, but when brought to God and multiplied by the donations and time of many others, they make a difference to about 1,000 people each month.

This is one of many food pantries working to help meet the needs of people for whom food insecurity is a reality of life. This is one of many ways that we can be part of the miracles that God is doing every day. As Jesus said to the disciples that day, he says to us, “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.” And what we see as small and inadequate, he tells us, “Bring them here to me” and they are multiplied so that instead of waiting for God to work a miracle, we can be participate in the miracle that God wants to do with us.

Let us pray.

God of love and God of miracles. We don't ever seem to have enough, but what we see as little is always much in your hands. Help us to be willing to be your hands and your feet participating in the miracles that you would do in our world. Open our eyes and ears and hearts so that we can see the ways that you are working and the ways that you invite us to participate with you in the miracles of love, caring, compassion, healing, and justice. Amen.

ⁱ I cannot recall the name of the colleague who shared this story many years ago.

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor offers this thought in a sermon called “The Problem with Miracles” in [Seeds of Heaven](#)