

WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/JULY 26, 2009

MIRACLES IN YOUR HANDS/JOHN 6:1-15

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I. THE TEXT

The only miracle included in all four gospels is a barley bread and sardine supper for 5000 people. For instance, Jesus' healing the blind man of Bethsaida is recorded only in Mark. Luke alone tells us about 10 men with leprosy cured of their disease. But each gospel writer included the story of the miraculous supper – it is a pretty significant miracle. This morning we will be hearing John's version – only in John's telling of the story do we learn of a young boy who brought lunch... John six, beginning at verse one...

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.

II. PRAYER: Loving and gracious Lord, be in the words spoken and in the words heard. May they be for us truth that shapes our understanding and encourages us in faithfulness. Amen.

III. IMPOSSIBILITIES

Jesus is now famous. It is perfectly understandable – no doubt, the story of 150 gallons of well-water turning into premium wine at a wedding made front-page news of the Jerusalem Gazette. The wedding launched Jesus onto the public scene and into the work he'd been sent to do. There was no stopping him... he became a tornado of compassion – children are healed, the crippled are throwing their crutches away, the blind see. News like that travels like lightning – it makes sense that on this particular day an enormous crowd had tracked Jesus and the disciples down – all wanting something... healing, hope, maybe just the sight of a celebrity... and, they are hungry. Jesus is the one who first notices that he and the disciples have a sea of starving people on their hands. And so Jesus turns and asks a simple, but trick question of his disciple Philip. "Phil, is there a Ralph's or a Whole Foods nearby we can pick up a few things for supper for these people?" Now, put yourself in Philip's shoes – Jesus has just named him chairman of the hospitality committee... and he panics. We learn a few things about Philip here... Philip is the resident realist. He quickly calculates what he has in his wallet, multiplies it by 12 for the rest of the wallets in the group and

then uses the numbers to make his point – “Jesus, we’ve got \$103.32 among us – supper for a few thousand is just not in the budget.” Philip’s rather reasonable conclusion? This is impossible... it can’t be done.

I suspect most of us would have been right in there with Philip. Imagine Philip’s anxiety – it’s impossible, it’s too big, too much, too expensive... and it can’t be done. These are the conclusions of a hardcore realist – in a reality without God in it. In circumstances like this, downright pessimism makes perfect sense. Pessimism comes easy for us these days, even those of us who try to stay near Jesus – watching the evening news grows more and more difficult. War, the economy, terror. The challenges loom large – can we fix health care, stave off climate change, educate our children? And, from time to time our own lives feel wobbly and maybe even a bit overwhelming. There are times the pessimist in each of us echoes the heart of Philip – nothing can be done... mission truly impossible.

IV. A BARLEY BREAD LUNCH

Well, back to our story. Fortunately, there are two non-realist players on the scene that day – one is a young boy who, when he left his house that morning had no idea he was carrying the miracle of supper for thousands. Oh, it is easy to skip right over him in the narrative – to not even notice. The other three gospel writers don’t even bother to mention him. Only John seems to see what this young boy did as an important part of the story. I imagine it went this way – as Andrew, and maybe the others, made their way through the crowd, the adults – also being realists – thought of the bits of food tucked in their own pockets – surely every person in the crowd hadn’t ventured out that day without so much as a protein bar or a banana. But that is hardly enough for everyone, so maybe I’d better just keep it tucked away for the moment. And so the adults, like Philip and Andrew, assume they really had nothing to offer in the face of the impossible... what’s a drop when you need the whole bucket.

But not so the young boy... I imagine him tugging at Andrew’s shirtsleeve like a youthful hero in a Frank Capra movie... “Here mister, you can have my lunch!” It wasn’t even a gourmet lunch. Barley was cheap – barley bread was the bread of the poor. It wasn’t large – a standard lunch for one small child... small and insignificant as it was, the boy offered it anyway. I imagine Andrew, found the boy’s offer charming, but – along with their \$103.32 – this little lunch was no help at all.

But, they were mistaken – because there is another player in this story. Jesus had the disciples organize the crowd into supper groups – they must have thought he was nuts, but they sat anyway. And then Jesus turned to the boy who didn’t yet know it, but whose bag contained a miracle – supper for thousands. The boy put his bread and sardines in Jesus’ hands. Jesus gave thanks and then the most amazing thing happened – we’re not told how – all we know is that by the time Jesus was through with the boy’s lunch every last dinner guest had pushed back from the table saying, “no, no, I couldn’t eat another bite.” And there was enough bread and pickled fish left over that each of the 12 disciples went home with a first century doggie bag. All because a little boy was not realistic enough to recognize the impossible. He was just willing to help... and a little child shall lead them.

V. IN JESUS’ HANDS

A little boy with a lunch becomes the mentor for every adult, every pessimist, so-called-realist and naysayer among us. A little boy, who when the adults in the room had settled the matter, and written supper off as hopeless, a little boy who simply said, “I’ll do what I can – you

can have my lunch.” In the world’s economy, it is the large, the powerful and important that make things happen... it is sweeping legislation and huge infusions of government dollars that change things. But most of us don’t have direct access to the power brokers. What **we** have is access to Jesus – and if we allow, Jesus has access to us. In his world the power is primarily in the ordinary, in the seemingly insignificant. Read through the gospels and you will see that God quite willingly worked through whoever made themselves available in faith, hope and love – even if the offer is made a bit timidly, a bit foolishly. Now, God worked through David, a King; and through Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, but most often it is with the little, the mundane, that God begins big things. Ours is the faith of the mustard seed, the widow’s mite, the simple cup of water given in Christ’s name, one lost coin, a dozen uneducated, unimpressive disciples. Ours is the faith, not of the grandiose and impressive, but of the simple and ordinary... ours is a loaves and fishes sort of faith. You see, little things, in Jesus’ hands become big things... ordinary people, in Jesus’ hands do extraordinary things. Common acts of kindness spill out into uncommon compassion. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) wrote: “Learn the lesson that, if you are to do the work of a prophet, what you need is not a sceptre, but a hoe.”

True power comes when God’s people throw caution to the wind and put the equivalent of their five loaves and two fish in Jesus hands to bless and break and multiply.

VI. LOOKING TO HELP

Our lives these days do seem full of the impossible. Whether thinking of the challenges of our world or our community or even our church, it is so easy for us to throw up our hands and with Philip and Andrew say, “Great idea, but let’s be realistic – the needs are just too great – it can’t be done.” “I’m too old. I’m too young. I don’t have time. I can’t. We can’t afford it. There aren’t enough of us.” When faced with what seems important but overwhelming we, understandably, get discouraged. Facing what feels impossible we are tempted to let things be as they are – to throw in the towel.

But Jesus turns to us and says, “I’ll take your lunch – just give me your bread and fish... just a little something so we can get started. I’m not asking you fix world hunger or bring peace in the Middle East or undo racism all by yourself. What I am asking is that you do what you think isn’t enough and give what feels too insignificant – give me what you have and I will bless and break and multiply.”

That is the way of the kingdom – it is quiet, sometimes imperceptible and most often in the moment feels like not enough. But in God’s hands, little things become big things... insignificant things become meaningful, small acts make a big difference. The boy didn’t offer a miracle, he offered some barley bread and some fish – and Jesus took it from there. The lad wasn’t looking to do the spectacular – he was looking to help. The miracle of this moment in John’s story is not so much in the number of people fed, but in a decision to sacrifice something simple.

VII. A BIT OF SACRIFICE

Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner writes, “I remember an especially dark time of my life. One of my children was sick, and in my anxiety for her I was, in my own way, as sick as she was. Then one day the phone rang, and it was a man named Lou Patrick, a minister from Charlotte, North Carolina, which is about eight hundred miles or so from Rupert, Vermont, where I live. I assumed he was calling from home and asked him how things were going down there, only to hear him say that, no, he wasn’t in Charlotte. He was at an inn about twenty minutes away from my house in Rupert. He knew something of what was going on in

my family and in me, and he said he thought maybe it would be some help to have a friend around for a day. The reason he didn't tell me in advance he was coming was that he knew I would tell him, for heaven's sake, not to do anything so crazy, so for heaven's sake he did something crazier still, which was to come those eight hundred miles without telling me he was coming. He had come, simply to be there for me. I don't think anything we found to say to each other amounted to very much. We just took a couple of walks, had a meal or two together, and smoked our pipes... that was about it.

I have never forgotten how he came all that distance just for that. Although, as far as I can remember we never so much as mentioned the name of Christ, Christ was as much in the air we breathed that day as the fragrance of our pipes was in the air. I believe that for a little time we, both of us, touched the hem of Christ's garment. I know that for a little time we, both of us, were healed."

Buechner concludes, "We are called to be Christs to each other like that... somebody calling on the phone: 'Just twenty minutes down the road did you say? Good God, you must be crazy!' And that is just it, of course. We are called to be crazy exactly like that... called to be to one another, the hands and feet of Christ."ⁱ

A simple gift of some time and gasoline – by God's grace healed a hurting soul.

VIII. ASSIGNMENT

Just like the young boy, just like Buechner's crazy-like-Christ friend, you carry potential miracles in your hands. Last week your assignment – should you have chosen to accept it – was to start your day by saying: "Lord, I know I am going to see a lot of you today, help me to treat you well." This week (and I promise – I won't be giving you weekly assignments for the rest of your life) – every morning, before you get out of bed, or if you are among those who need a cup of coffee before your brain flips on, after your first cup of coffee, I want you to pray, with intention, a simple prayer. "Lord, use me today." And then, as you leave your house each morning, as you remember this prayer throughout the day, listen for what God asks of you.

As you feel God nudging you, when you hear God asking for your bread and fish, your gasoline, your time say "yes." Offer yourself and do as God asks. Dare to really show someone you love them; risk an awkward conversation with a person of a different color; ask forgiveness; write a letter to a politician or to a long-lost friend; invite a friend to church; muster up the courage to right a wrong; say "yes" to something impossible. I don't know how God will nudge you – but imagine what our community and world could become as we risk being blessed and broken and multiplied by simply putting ourselves in the hands of Jesus to be used.

You carry potential miracles in your hands. If we don't offer them, our world remains the same; if nothing changes, nothing changes... the impossible stays that way. Missionary giant Hudson Taylor put it this way, "*I used to ask God if he would come and help me. Then I asked if I could come and help him. Finally, I ended by asking God to do his own work through me.*" As we give what we have over to Jesus, the barley bread and sardines get broken. We give God the chance to do things beyond what we realists would ever expect. That is how our apparently small, our seemingly insignificant stories are woven into God's very big and very important one. That is the economy of God's Kingdom. It is simply the way God works.

Amen and amen.

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*, pp. 151-152.