

Before Miracles

Ephesians 3: 14 - 21

John 6: 10 – 15

Years ago I experienced a call to ministry. It was, in my memory, exhausting and frightening for several days. What I remember most were the assurances I felt that this was truly my future, this was how I was intended to live my life. There was no doubt! Here is was, God's idea for my life! So I said, "Yes!"

You will be a Pastor in the Methodist Church. That's who we were 3 hymnals ago. It didn't matter what anyone else thought. Within days, I was off to college! My dad had words for me. "When you get a church I will get you a car." And he was true to his word. When the time came, he found an 8 years old car, with a 3 speed transmission that I once got to go 60 miles per hour down the Knapp hill.

Mom never, ever, spoke a word to me about all this, good, bad, or indifferent. But on that first day for freshmen students, she took me over to the Methodist Campus Ministry and made sure I met the campus pastor. I appreciated the work of many friends, teachers, professors, and pastors as 1966 became 1975 and I was ordained an Elder in the Wisconsin Conference of the United Methodist Church. More than family were convinced this would be some kind of miracle! Perhaps it was!

But what I would like to tell you about today is another miracle. Let me set the stage. Jesus is out and about and people continue to gather around to hear him. Jesus makes this picnic for everyone. Jesus turns five barley loaves and two pickled fish into a banquet of plenty for more people than one could count. I'm talking about one of the great miracle stories in the bible. It is very well known. It has been a favorite for centuries. And important. Here is one of very few accounts of something in the life of Jesus that John and Matthew, Mark, & Luke each include in their gospel.

A search through the Old Testament for something like this miracle fills one with theological things to think about for a long time. If you put this miracle account along side the Old Testament and line the two up just so, you read that Jesus is the new Moses, feeding his followers with bread, just as Moses fed those on the way to the promised land with Manna.

But I also see, as I look on this miracle, a story about human nature. Oh, how quick we are, to decide there is not enough of this or that to go around. And how often God proves us wrong. We choose our prophets and kings you see, according to how well they feed us! Where do I start? Well, there's the miracle itself, an impossible, irrational, stupendous act of God, and what am I going to say about that. Really! If I tell you it happened exactly the way the gospel says it happened, chances are good you'll get cranky because nothing like this ever happens to you! If I say, "Wait a minute!" this is a myth! You'll turn to your neighbor and ask, "Well, what are we doing here?"

I know! Most of the five thousand had a little food tucked away in their tunics. People in that day and place always had a little something to eat, just in case. That explains it! Jesus was there and everyone felt compelled to produce their secret stash, and the result was so much food, everyone ate and there were twelve baskets left over, and the miracle was how everyone was willing to share.

No??? Are you sure?

Then you agree with our scripture today, which says boldly that Jesus worked a sign, a wonder, and when the people saw it, they knew who Jesus was. The feeding of the five thousand was understood by the five thousand themselves as God's hand in human affairs, God's supernatural interruption of the natural order. Here is bread where there had been no bread, fish where there had been no fish, and this served to prove who Jesus was, and to establish their faith in him. Establish it, not confirm it.

The idea is, the miracle made people believe, gave them faith, where there had been no faith, the same as it gave them food where there had been no food. A need is met. There's a hunger in us for miracles, for positive proof of God's existence that will change us on the spot into happier, healthier, and holier human beings. When people say they do not believe in miracles, is that nothing more than an explanation why miracles never happen to them?

If you do not happen to believe in miracles, you tend to want one, even if you know there is a good chance it will turn your life upside down. Since 1981, without fail, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in a small village called Medjugorje, the Virgin Mary has been appearing and giving messages to the world. The message is, that time is short, that much depends on our return to the ways of God, and that Mary the Virgin begs us, through prayer, fasting, and penance, to convert our lives into lives of peace with God and our neighbors.

It doesn't phase me that people experience these apparitions. The message itself does not give me pause. What troubles me is how there is a web page about this, and folks from all over the world continue to come, and photograph and videotape every move of those who receive the messages. While there, they look for miracles of their own: healings, words written in the sky, the sun spinning in place, maybe even an eclipse that if you look at directly, will harm your eyes. Now there's proof of God for you! Rosaries turn from silver to gold at Medjugorje. Right before people's eyes.

People who have been there come away saying the miracles are not the point. The miracles only serve to get people's attention so they will listen to the message of the Blessed Virgin. I wonder about that. Do people really travel thousands of miles and spend thousands of dollars to hear a message most of us can hear, and do hear at First United Methodist Church? Do people go in hopes of being changed from silver into gold, of being transformed into something so rare and pure that everyone can see? The wish for a miracle, the wish for God to operate outside the laws of nature, is the wish to be made to believe by something supernaturally but undeniably true. It is the wish to have my doubt taken away for good, to have proof of God, and have my own personal

story, to tell about the miracle that has happened to me. Sound good to you? An experience that would cause us to have faith so we would never have to wonder again?

C.S. Lewis pointed out that a miracle is something that takes your freedom away, along with your doubts, something that leaves you no choice but to believe. You witness a miracle and it makes you, forces you, to have faith. Come to think of it, I think I understand what happened to me that sunshiny Sunday 51 years ago next week. Today I am a lot more thankful for the pastors, professors, and lay folk who challenged me and shaped me into who I became.

Without faith, there are always other explanations for even the best miracles: Did you hear the voice of God? It sounded like ordinary thunder to me. Was she healed of her illness? It was probably psychosomatic in the first place. What makes you so sure that message is from the Blessed Virgin Mary? Those being visited with messages could be having the time of their lives, conning the whole world. You call that evidence? You call that proof? There is not proof for anything that really matters in the world. No proof! How do you prove that your child is beautiful to you? How do you prove the infinite worth of your friend, or the loveliness of the world, or the goodness of your life? Home grown miracles they are. But there is no evidence for any of them, nothing that could prove them to anyone else, or to you if you did not believe in them first. Do we go about this backwards all the time? Which comes first? Faith or miracles? What if faith doesn't follow miracles, but comes before them? What if something is holy, is a life giving wonder, and is not something about IT, but something about US?

Something like: we can believe in spite of our doubts. Something like: we can have faith without proof. Something like: because we can be in these ways, miraculous things do happen from time to time, some of them as extraordinary as the voice of the Blessed Virgin Mary telling us what to do with our lives. But most of them are as ordinary as the voices of our fellow human beings telling us that we are loved, that we are precious in their sight, that they want to link their lives with ours.

In the gospel of John, something miraculous happened on that hillside in Galilee: Silver turned into gold; a snack turned into a banquet; skeptics turned into believers; a carpenter turned into a king. People were fed, body and soul, with barley loaves and with the very Bread of Heaven, and when they were full their eyes opened. "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!" they said. Here I kinds get stuck in the text!

And I wonder . . . Who is he to You, and Me - - between miracles? Can we still proclaim him king when we are not particularly well fed, when the children break our hearts, the doctor can't fix it, and you come here, First United Methodist Church and no one sends a smile your way, and there is no manna - no miracle - to be found? Can we still proclaim him King? I tell ya!! The world is swarming with miracles, for those with eyes to see.