

August 13, 2006
Pentecost 10

“Do You Believe in Miracles?”

JOHN 6:1-15

Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), ² and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick. ³ Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. ⁴ The Jewish Passover Feast was near. ⁵ When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” ⁶ He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. ⁷ Philip answered him, “Eight months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!” ⁸ Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up, ⁹ “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?” ¹⁰ Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them. ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. ¹² When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.” ¹³ So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten. ¹⁴ After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, “Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.” ¹⁵ Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

Do you believe in miracles? The children of Israel certainly did when they woke up every morning as they were traveling through the desert on the way to the Promised Land. They woke up to manna sent down from heaven that nourished them for forty years. 5000 people also believed in miracles after they watched Jesus feed the large crowd miraculously with only five little loaves of barley bread and two small fish.

Do you believe in the miracles recorded for us in the Bible? If you do, then it means the Holy Spirit has changed your heart. Not everyone accepts these miracles as being true. Some say these are legends or stories that developed in the history of the church by people who wanted to make the message about Jesus more spectacular. I once saw some material for Vacation Bible School that featured this lesson based on the miracle of the five loaves and two small fish. The theme was “How a Little Boy Shares His Lunch.” Willingly or inadvertently, there is a tendency to ignore the miracles and focus on things that are more human such as sharing a lunch. It is easy, all too easy, to take our eyes off of Jesus and his mighty miracles. The real point of the account is not a little boy sharing his lunch. The emphasis is on Jesus, Lord and God, showing that he can provide miraculously for all our greatest needs in life.

Facing the impossible

An impossible situation confronted Jesus and his disciples when a large crowd of people followed Jesus into a remote, quiet place where he wanted to be alone with his disciples and get some rest. "When Jesus looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, 'Where shall we buy bread for all these people to eat?'" Jesus had compassion on this large crowd of people that followed him. He saw as them as sheep without a shepherd. So many trusted in themselves and their good deeds to make themselves acceptable to God. Jesus took the time to teach them the truth about himself.

Jesus also had compassion and concern for these people if they did not find enough food. He asked one of his disciples, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" Jesus knew what he was going to do, but he wanted to test the faith of his disciples. They had seen him walk on water, turn water into wine, heal the lame and blind. This should have been the forensic evidence they needed to believe Jesus was ready for another miracle, ready to step in use his power as God to help people in need.

Philip thinks in terms of money. He calculates 8 months worth of wages would not be able to provide enough food so everyone could have just one bite. It can happen to all of us that we become so concerned about money or the lack of money that we fail to see the greatest blessings are in the Lord and the mighty miracles he has performed to rescue us. John 20 says that these miracles were written that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing we might have life in his name. Everything around me says what I can buy with my money is more important to me than the blessings I have in Christ Jesus and his miracles.

Andrew steps in while Philip is crunching the numbers. He focuses his attention on the human resources available. There was a little boy with only five barley loaves and two small fish. Here was some food but it was almost a joke, just five little barley breads and two small fish. You can almost hear the frustration in the voice of Andrew as he says, "How far will they go among so many?" Even if people were encouraged to share more of their food what good would that be? Most of them joined the crowd running to see Jesus. They did not have time to grab some food before they left home.

How many times have we been tripped up like these two disciples of Jesus? I am no different. I wonder sometimes how we can reach more people with the gospel through this congregation. We look at the situation around us and see the human side of things and not the miraculous side. When David picked up five smooth stones he was no match for the mighty giant Goliath. That did not bother David. He believed in a God who could perform miracles, including the miracle of giving the stone enough force and accuracy to knock down the mighty Goliath. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the human side of us says that is only a little Jewish baby born of displaced poor parents from Nazareth. Faith accepts that fact that this child is the Son of God from all eternity, the Savior of the world. Often big things come in little packages when it comes to our faith. A little bit of bread and a small cup of wine give us the very body and blood of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.

Who knows what the Lord can do with the Bible camp we held here in our church this past week. What if one of the lessons told this past week plants itself deeply in the heart of the children and they become powerful witnesses to Jesus in their generation. I was able to teach 18 kids this past week. Sure it was exhausting, but also very rewarding. 7 of the children wanted to take a Bible home from this church. Who knows what the Lord can do

with these Bibles placed into the hands of children who read it for the first time in their lives. It seems like something small, but is it really.

Years ago, there was a man in Philadelphia named Walt who volunteered to help with the Sunday school in his new church. He had the 6th grade group. He went into the streets, the rough part of the city, and challenged kids playing in the streets to a game of marbles. Those were the days when kids enjoyed playing marbles. He always won and won their respect. Then he invited them to come to Sunday school. He found 13 kids for his class. 11 of the 13 entered into full time work for the Christian church. You never know what the Lord can do with smooth stones in the hand of shepherd boy, marbles in the hand of a man named Walt, and barley loaves and fish the little boy was carrying with him placed into the hands of Jesus.

Believing the miracle

It may seem impossible to feed 5000 hungry people sitting on the mountainside listening to Jesus, but then you remember who is on the mountain with these people. Jesus asks the people to sit down. No problem. There was lots of green grass in the area. This was a good place to feed sheep, and an even better place to feed people with the all important truth that Jesus Christ is their Lord and God who can provide them with everything, including freedom from sin and eternal death. 5000 men, not counting the women and the children. Ever try to feed a large crowd of people at your house or be responsible for a family reunion where 150 come from near and far. 5000 would even be a problem for Martha Stewart, but not for Jesus.

Jesus takes the little barley breads, perhaps not much bigger around than small tortilla. He takes the fish, most likely small fish that had been salted and dried along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Then he takes the food and gives thanks. That is a good practice. Follow Jesus example. Pray before all your meals, even the ones you eat alone or the ones you eat in the restaurant. Have you ever seen the Norman Rockwell painting of the little boy and his mother sitting in the booth in the restaurant, bowing their heads and praying before the meal? The painting shows people as they stop eating and watch them pray. We love this prayer in the Psalm we just sang together: "The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing." Some you may even use this as your meal prayer.

And now the people feast! They hand out the pieces of bread and the pieces of fish. They just keep multiplying and multiplying and multiplying. Suddenly it is so quiet. All you hear are the sounds of people munching and chewing their food until they have more than enough to eat. The last day of Bible camp we had ice cream cups for the kids. My group sat on the curb, eating the ice cream with little wooden spoons. One of the kids said, "Pastor it is so quiet." That's what happens when people are busy eating and enjoying their food with more than enough to satisfy their hunger.

Then there is the element of the spectacular that occurs in every one of Jesus' miracles. Lame people don't just stumble around after being healed, they jump up and take their beds and go home. The water turned to wine is the best wine anyone has ever tasted. Napa Valley could never compete. He asks them to pick up the leftovers. Literally the

Greek word means a large abundance, the same kind of word that is used for water flowing up out of the ground and running all over the place. There were pieces of fish and bread left over everywhere. Twelve baskets are left over. Eyes that once cast a pathetic glance at fish and bread for being "So little for so many" now open wide in amazement at how much was left over so that nothing would be wasted.

And what was the reaction of the people when they saw what had happened? They remembered a verse book of Deuteronomy that predicted a great Prophet would come into the world. They said to each other, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." As they listened to this great Prophet speak they heard him proclaim himself as the very Son of God from all eternity. How true are the words of John 20: "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you might have life in his name." The miracles were recorded for us that we might believe and have life through his name. Salvation is found in no other name, except the name of Jesus.

One day in our Bible camp, I asked the group I was teaching whether or not we can get to heaven by being good. Most of the kids said yes to this question. All of us were born with this thinking, because we do not understand how far we have fallen short of God's glory. We tried to show how our lack of perfection makes it impossible for God to love us. We held up a balloon. One of the volunteers took a tack and stuck it into the balloon. We told the kids that if we were perfect all our lives, but only did one thing wrong, it would ruin our perfection before God and make us unfit for eternal life. The book of James says, "If we offend in one point, we are guilty of all." Then we asked the boy who broke the balloon to get some masking tape to fix it. He ran, then stopped, and they realized how impossible this is, just as it is impossible to use imperfect works to try and restore our relationship with God. Dear Christians we believe in miracles, not just the miracle of 5000 fed with five barley loaves and two small fish, but the miracle of the blood of Jesus cleansing us from all sin. Amen.