

Our Gospel lesson this morning presents us with two miracle stories: the feeding of 5000 with just 5 loaves and 2 fish, and Jesus walking on the water to bring calm and peace to his disciples when they were in peril on the sea, as the old hymn puts it. Scripture is full of miracles, but the whole notion of miracles is rather confusing and unclear, because we tend to use the word *miracle* in such different ways. For example, we might say, “The parking lot at the DECC was unbelievably full, but by some miracle, I found a parking place!” Is finding a parking place *really* a miracle? Or we might refer to a *medical* miracle, some new technology that saves lives that would formally have been lost. Such *miracles* are often a result of human ingenuity, hard work, or even sheer random luck. Are such advances truly a miracle? Or we might speak of the miracle of birth, which happens all the time, but nevertheless, fills us with wonder. Is each birth a miracle? Or is a miracle something rare, something otherwise inexplicable, apart from attributing it to God’s direct hand and doing? Maybe miracles come in different size, shapes, and flavors?

What makes something a miracle anyways? Here are the top two definitions of a miracle. First, “a miracle is a highly improbable or extraordinary event, development, or accomplishment that brings very welcome consequences.” That would cover those medical and technological miracles, at least, maybe the parking place, but hard to say. Here’s the other top definition: “a miracle is a surprising and welcome event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws and is therefore considered to be the work of a *divine agency*.” The Divine Agency—in other words, Godly intervention—is the type of miracle we see happening throughout Scripture, including in our Gospel lessons today. Maybe some miracles involve human agency or activity, and other miracles involve Divine agency or activity. And I’m going to suggest that, at least in terms of our Gospel lesson, both human *and* divine agency may come *together* to create the miracle.

Before we dig into these miracles individually, I want to mention that although they each seem very different from one another, both of these miracles in our lesson this morning are what we might call miracles of provision, of God providing. Both of these miracles of provision happen *because* God is meeting a need. A need for sustenance in the first miracle of feeding; a need for calm and protection in the second miracle of the

boat in peril. And I believe that this is a helpful reminder to us that faith in God does not mean we don't ever find ourselves in needy, difficult circumstances. The 5000 people in the first miracle were hungry, both for food and for God. The disciples in the boat in the second miracle were beset by stormy waters, rowing against the wind, in need of strength and help. We can be as faithful as any Christians ever have been and still find ourselves in need, hungry, surrounded by frightening circumstances, overwhelmed and in need of direction. Faith does not protect us from the brokenness of the world. But faith assures us that we do not face that brokenness without the love and goodness of God manifested with us in such a way as to bring us what is needed. So, if you are experiencing need or stormy waters, it's no indication *at all* that you are somehow faithless, or that God is punishing or abandoning you. Any more than that would be true of the 5000 hungry folks or the disciples in the boat. Brokenness happens, even to faithful people. But faithful people can also discover the grace of God present in such brokenness and know that God is with them. Both of these miracles of provision demonstrate that truth.

Let's look at the first miracle recorded in John 6, that of the feeding of the 5000. That's a huge crowd! You know how we worry at congregational dinners or funeral luncheons about having enough food? Imagine needing to feed 5000 hungry people! And no Costco at hand either! Instead the only sustenance available is that of a young boy who brought with him 5 barley loaves and 2 fish. Given that one of our young boy members, Tor Skadberg, has taken to baking loaves of bread and bringing them to church functions, I can't help but think about Tor when I read this story now! This young boy in our lesson was perhaps the Tor of his day! And what a bright boy he must have been, as apparently, he's the only one in the crowd who thought ahead and packed a lunch. We might picture him edging off to the side of the crowd, ducking behind a rock, and quietly eating his lunch, so that no one tries to persuade him to share. But, that's not what happens! He's not only a bright boy, he's a *generous* boy. He lets the folks in charge know that he has this bit of food and is willing to share it, for whatever that's worth. This is an impressive and inspiring witness to us. It reminds us that the younger among us can be wiser and more generous than the older among us at times. It also reminds us that if we're willing to risk sharing a little, God can make a whole lot out of our little. If *we* had been there and had

thought ahead to bring our lunch, wouldn't most of us, in our self-effacing Minnesotan way, have thought to ourselves, "I won't bother those busy and important disciples with the news of my little bit of food, it won't help anyways, and I'll just look foolish." And what would the result have been then? Because think about it—would the multiplying of the food have been possible without that little bit to start with? God may want our willingness to share our little in order to make a whole lot *out of* our little. Which is what happens here. Jesus blesses the food and shares it, and sure enough, all 5000 ate until they were full, and there were 12 baskets of leftovers at the end. It was *a miracle*! But what kind of a miracle? It involved both human and Divine agency, didn't it? Only God in Christ can feed 5000 people with 5 barley loaves and 2 fishes. That's *divine intervention*. But, the boy provided those 5 loaves and 2 fishes. That's human agency and generosity. With those two elements coming together, God creates this miracle. A miracle of provision, of literally feeding the hungry. God does the heavy lifting, but humans still had a part to play.

And now comes the second miracle within the same day. After the picnic, Jesus withdraws by himself for some time to rest and be restored, and to prevent the crowd from crowning him king. As it becomes dark, the disciples cross the sea of Galilee in a boat toward Capernaum. We're not entirely sure why they did so. Capernaum was where they were making their home at this time, and I suppose, understandably, they wanted to get back to their homes and sleep in their own beds. But, many of them were experienced anglers, and they were well acquainted with the dangers of the Sea of Galilee. Just like you don't casually mess around with Lake Superior, you didn't mess around with that Sea of Galilee either. While not nearly the size of Lake Superior, it was long and narrow, and with a dangerous wind, it became virtually impossible to cross. The disciples knew this, but for whatever reason, they cross anyway. The water is rough, and it's slow going for them. But they keep on manning the oars, rowing against the wind. Many of us know that this would be hard and exhausting work. Almost certainly, the disciples were weary from a long day, exhausted from rowing against the wind, wet and wind-blown, and becoming increasingly alarmed about their safety. The disciples were in genuine peril on this dark, stormy sea. And then Jesus appears, walking towards them on the water. Their first assumption is that some ghostly apparition is approaching, and no wonder; people can't actually walk

on water, you know. That would require *a miracle*. But a miracle it is! Jesus walks to them, is *with them in the storm* and calms them by saying, “It is I; do not be afraid.” Then he’s in the boat with them and they reach land safely and quickly. I doubt that happened because Jesus pulled a boat motor out of his back pocket and powered the boat to shore; most likely they kept on rowing, but now they were steady and focused, the water was calm, and they had Jesus in the boat with them. Suddenly, making shore safely was much simpler than it had been. Again, then, we see both Divine agency and human agency at work here, yes? Jesus walks on water and calms their fears; the disciples row. Pulling these things together, God makes a miracle happen.

We continue to see this pattern to this day. Maybe every congregation has a miracle story, but our congregation likes to celebrate what we might call the “Miracle of the Bells”. Given how many newer members we have, not all of you know this story, so I’ll briefly tell it again; please be patient with me, long-time members. Some years ago, it seemed our fledgling bell choir was doomed when the church from whom we leased our handbells requested their return. Our small congregation couldn’t afford the purchase of a set of handbells, running into thousands of dollars. As many of you know, on the last Christmas Day service at which the bells were to play, a woman named Jane Grubb, whom most of us didn’t know and who very rarely worshiped here or anywhere at all, happened to attend and heard about the departure of the bells. For whatever reason, she decided that she would see that our little church had a set of handbells. Without our knowledge or even permission, she wrote to her friends and relatives all around the country and asked them to send money to our church for the purpose of purchasing handbells. Talk about nerve. Talk about offering up your 5 loaves and 2 fishes in the face of overwhelming odds or manning the oars in the fishing boat even with the stormy sea against you. Amazingly, money poured in, a used handbell set in excellent condition was located for us, and nearly to the penny the donations from all around the nation covered the expense on the very day the purchase was completed. It was a *miracle*! Or was it? Of course, you could write all of that off as a set of coincidences, powered by someone temporarily out of her mind, and made possible by a group of goofy people making foolish donations through the mail to a cause they barely understood. But, most of us don’t see it that way. We instead see God’s hand in every step of the process, see the whole experience as evidence of God’s love and

concern and affirmation for *us*, a small congregation with a big heart. We see how human agency and Divine agency came together to create our own congregational miracle. And so—maybe miracles, to some degree, are not so much a matter of *objective* proof as they are a matter of *subjective* perspective.....understanding the miracle is a matter of how we perceive God at work in what happens. This may be what theologian Frederick Buechner means when he writes, “Faith in God is less apt to proceed from miracles than miracles from faith in God.” Did you catch that? “Faith in God is less apt to proceed from miracles than miracles from faith in God.” Miracles don’t create our faith. Rather, through eyes of faith, we *see* the miracles, *and* we can be a part of the miracles. Like the boy who offers up his 5 loaves and 2 fishes or the disciples rowing against the wind in their small boat or Jane Grubb sending out letters.

All of which leads me to believe that as people of faith, we need to pay attention! We need to be alert. We want to be vigilant observers of this world in which God places us, so that we don’t miss out. One theologian has written this: “The most overlooked miracle is that God shows up in everyday life events and in such ordinary forms as bread, wind, water, words, and people.” In our gospel lesson, Christ hosts a supper for 5000, but this morning, Christ will host a meal for us, in which ordinary bread and wine becomes a means of grace, a way in which Christ is truly present with us, for us, *within* us. There is human agency involved; someone creates and sets up and distributes the wafers and the wine. But the real *miracle* is Christ’s presence, the grace we receive, the forgiveness we are granted, the community which we become a part of. Holy Communion is a much a miracle of provision as is feeding 5000 or calming a storm. For that matter, Christ’s Divine Presence with us, throughout each day and night, is a miracle of provision, protection, and presence, as our sermon hymn celebrates. We live in a world of miracles, and aren’t you glad? How dark and sad and lonely a world would it be without miracles? May Christ open our souls to receive the miracles of God’s love and provision for us. Amen.

