

In the name of the God who miraculously provides, Amen.

Do you believe in miracles? I know ... you're church folks and therefore you're *supposed* to believe in miracles. But do you? Do you really? The word "miracle," comes from the, "Middle English, ... (with a) Latin root, a wonder, marvel, from *mirari* to wonder at¹." Are there things in the world that you truly "wonder at?"

We live in a scientific age, an age in which it is almost passé to believe in miracles. I've heard many scientists make statements similar to this, "There is a logical, scientific explanation for everything that happens in the world." Well, the corollary, or flip side of that statement is, "If it cannot be explained rationally, scientifically, it didn't happen." This morning's Gospel reading is about perhaps the greatest of Jesus' miracles – the feeding of the five thousand.

There are all kinds of questions that surround this miracle story. First, did it happen at all? My answer to that is a confidently resounding, "Yes!" This is one of that handful of stories that appear, in almost identical form, in all of the Gospels. Given the number of differences that we find when we compare Matthew, Mark, Luke and John's accounts of Jesus' life and ministry, when I find a story that appears, almost verbatim in all four, I give that story a great deal of credence. But the greater question for many

¹ Merriam Webster Dictionary on-line, www.merriamwebster.com

people is the question of *how* this event took place. In other words, was it really a miracle?

Some post modern biblical scholars have talked about this as being a story of a true miracle, but not the miracle we usually think of. They say that God's multiplication of a few loaves of bread and some fish into sufficient food to feed tens of thousands is so against nature that there must be another explanation for it. Therefore, they hypothesize that Jesus and the disciples started sharing everything they had with the people who were sitting closest to them. The people saw Jesus' group being completely unselfish and felt charitable enough as a result to pull out whatever food they had brought with them and pass it out. Everyone shared what they had – making this a “miracle of sharing,” for all who were there. My problem with this theory is two-fold.

First: If this was a story about everyone sitting around and sharing what food they had brought, would the story have survived for 2,000 years and would it have been a cornerstone story in all four Gospels? There were a lot of people at Max Yazgur's farm in Woodstock, NY in 1969 who shared what they had with those around them – some of it even food. Do you think those sharing stories will be around in another 1950 years? No. This was something more. My second problem with this theory is, if everyone simply shared what they had brought, why did they only take up – as scraps – the same things they had passed out (bread and fish). Didn't somebody in the crowd bring a little bit of roasted lamb or some hummus? And didn't those who brought extra want to take

the leftovers home with *them*? No. This was a miracle of multiplication, not a miracle of sharing.

The chief objection that modernists have with this story was, I think, answered by St. Augustine over 1500 years ago. Augustine said, “Miracles are not contrary to nature, but only contrary to what we *know* about nature.” The miracle here was that a weary but compassionate Jesus understood the true power of the Creator God – the Father of the universe. And He acted in accordance with that knowledge: with miraculous results.

Jesus spent that day teaching and preaching to a crowd of “five thousand men, besides women and children.” Most anthropologists and biblical scholars agree that if there were 5,000 men in attendance, the total number of people was between 10,000-12,500. [So here’s a sub-miracle in this story – the people had been there all day with Jesus healing, teaching and preaching, and they *wanted* to stay, even though it was getting dark and they hadn’t eaten. That’s a miracle. But I digress.] When it began to get dark the disciples came to Jesus and expressed concern about the fact that they were far away from places where people could get something to eat and no one had had a meal that day.

The disciples are worried here – as well they might have been. Putting this into present day terms we might understand, the number of people gathered to hear Jesus that day was just slightly below the combined population of Silsbee and Lumberton². All

² 15,124 according to US census data for 2000 (Silsbee = 6,393; Lumberton = 8,731)

these folks had been sitting outside on the ground all day and now the disciples just wanted them to leave – to go and get themselves something to eat – so that Jesus and the disciples could share their own small evening meal. But according to Matthew, Jesus had compassion on the crowd in all things, so he asked the disciples what food they had. They brought Him the five small loaves and the two small fish. He then told the disciples to feed the crowd themselves, and he blessed and broke the loaves and fish and told the disciples to hand them out.

Note the big difference between the disciples and Jesus there. The disciples saw a huge, indeed overwhelming need, and they worried and fretted over it – knowing that they did not have the ability to do anything to remedy the situation. Jesus, on the other hand, sees the incredible need, understands the power of God, takes what meager resources they have and offers them in true thanksgiving to God. And God does the rest. A true miracle of enormous proportions.

Dr. H. King Oehmig tells a story of the time that a church congregation from Cartersville, Georgia wanted to begin a Habitat for Humanity group. It was in the early days of Habitat, so the group went to Americus, Georgia to meet with Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity. The group toured the Habitat facilities and saw a presentation on how groups operate. Then Mr. Fuller took time from his busy schedule to go and talk to this group. During the course of their conversation, one of the folks from Cartersville said, “Mr. Fuller, we think this is what God’s calling us to do. But

before we begin, how much money do you think we should have in the bank to get us off the ground?” Fuller leaned toward the man and in a very low and serious voice told him, “It would be wholly irresponsible, completely negligent, totally feather-brained if you started an affiliate without at least one dollar. But you have to have one dollar. Don’t dare make a move without it!” King Oehmig says that that day, the Cartersville group learned, “as the disciples discovered with Jesus that evening, when He told them to feed the masses themselves – ... that faced with the Gospel imperative, we were searching for a *reasonable alternative to faith*.” Just like modern America searches for a reasonable alternative to a miracle.

The miracle of the loaves and fish is not just a story, not even just a miracle, in addition, it is a way of miraculously living each day. When we’re faced with seemingly incalculable difficulties, we should not – indeed cannot, if we’re living in faith – wring our hands in worry or complain about how insignificant and lacking our resources are. Instead, we should take what we have, offer it in thanksgiving, humbly, before the God who gave us everything. Then we should leave our meager resources to be blessed and broken by God. Then we, as God’s hands in the world, should spread those blessed resources out and watch as they grow and expand to fill the need.

In a few minutes, we’re going to gather around the altar for Holy Eucharist. When we do, look at the bread and wine as they come around. Notice that we never run out. People bring bread and wine down the aisle and it is put on the altar. There we offer

these elements along with the money we have given, to God. At the altar, these gifts are blessed – offered to God in thanksgiving for all God gives us – and then they are broken and distributed to you. We never run out, because that’s the gift of living miraculously that Jesus points us to.

In what other ways can we live our lives miraculously today, and every day.

Amen