

“Making Sense of the Miraculous”

John 6:1–21

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There is a scene near the end of “The Da Vinci Code” in which Sophie Neveu walks up to a pool of water. She has just learned that she is the last living descendent of Jesus Christ through Mary Magdalene. If you have not read the book or seen the film, this may seem startling, but this is a story Dan Brown tells, Sophie has just learned who she is, and she has been talking with scholar Robert Langdon about her doubts and Jesus’ identity. With the story about Jesus walking on water clearly in mind, and wondering if she can do the same, Sophie dips her foot into the pool, and then says, “Nope. Maybe I’ll do better with the wine.”

Miracle stories always present challenges, and we have two of them in today’s Gospel reading — the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking on water. A character in “The Da Vinci Code” named Sir Leigh Teabing insists that the Jesus in the canonical Gospels does more miraculous things than the Jesus in the noncanonical Gospels, but the opposite is true. It is in the Gospel of Thomas that the young Jesus kills a bird and then brings it back to life, ostensibly exploring his powers, while the Jesus of scripture has his feet planted firmly on the ground, though in John, there are times when he seems to hover a bit.

There are miracles in the Christian Testament, and they are significant, but not for the reasons we might think, and often there are different ways of understanding miracles. The purpose of miracle stories like the one we have read today is to offer a sign of who Jesus is. Jesus does not put on a show simply to impress and gain popularity. During his temptations in the wilderness, he refuses the invitation to throw himself off the temple wall and be saved miraculously, and in today’s reading, when people want to make him king, he goes into hiding. He feeds people because they are hungry and to offer a sign that he has come to meet such needs. He is not trying to wow anyone. Furthermore, exactly what happens here is open to interpretation.

In regard to walking on water, there are jokes about knowing where the rocks are, and I have to say that having been swimming in Lake Galilee in between Tiberias and Capernaum, there are rocks all along the shoreline and into the shallow water... But be that as it may, I want to focus on the story of a miraculous feeding. And I need to say at the outset that I have no need to demythologize every sacred story.

A mentor of mine, when asked by a search committee if he believed that Jonah was swallowed by a fish — that is, if he took the story literally — said that he had no difficulty believing God could create a fish large enough to swallow a person whole, but that the truth of the story did not depend on such a literal reading. In like manner, I would say that I have no difficulty believing Jesus could make a little bread and fish go a long way, but there are other ways to read the story without removing the element of the miraculous entirely.

For example, some scholars suggest that what happens is that at first the young boy who has five barley loaves and two fish is willing to share what he has. Jesus embraces this gift, blesses it, and then invites others in the large crowd who might have some food to share it with others. And as it turns out, there is enough there for everyone.

It may seem like this is taking all the magic out of the story, but what would be the greater miracle — for Jesus to create more bread and fish out of thin air, or for Jesus to convince a large crowd of people to get past their fear of not having enough for themselves in order to make sure everyone has something to eat? These are poor people, by and large, do they have enough for themselves *and* others?

Even the disciples seem to embrace a model of scarcity. When Jesus asks them not if but how they will feed the people, they say six months wages would not buy food for each person to have a little. We can't do it, they say, our resources are limited, there is not enough for all! Jesus, on the other hand, embraces a model of abundance. He trusts in God, there will be enough for everyone, and somehow, following this interpretation, he convinces the crowd to believe there will. So, they are willing to share. That is a miracle for any group in any time!

To this day, we tend to embrace a model of scarcity. There is only so much love to go around. So, if our sibling receives affection, there

will be less for us. There is only so much voice, power, or agency to be had. So, if “those people” get to have more, we will end up with less. There are only so many jobs, there is a limited amount of land, there is a finite amount of money. So, we better get and hold on to ours!

And the truth is some resources are limited, but not as limited as we think, and in God’s realm, the concepts of abundance, generosity, and trust shape life. Jesus models such a way, assuming the people can be fed, and then finding a way to make it happen. He doesn’t worry about whether he will have enough, and he doesn’t want others to worry either. He trusts in God to make sure there is enough one day at a time.

It’s why his model prayer we share each week includes a petition for God to grant us *our daily bread*, which means enough not for our working lives and retirement covering all possible contingencies, but for today, just today. That’s the kind of trust Jesus invites us to live with, and only with this kind of trust can we be as generous as he calls to be. When we do and are, it is something to behold, miraculous even!

For this kind of generosity goes against the grain of common practice. I think of a man who was at the motel where Dana and I and our German shepherds stayed in Ann Arbor, Michigan, a week ago while we were spending time with Ali. He was at the complimentary breakfast every morning, wearing an American flag shirt and revealing his brand of patriotism in various ways. But he was also making sure he was getting his share and more of the breakfast each day.

He and his wife would eat, and then he would grab as many extra milks, yogurts, and muffins as he could carry. He didn’t just take something for a snack, something many people do, a piece of fruit or a granola bar. He took enough for several meals, sometimes taking all the milk, and with no consideration of whether others would have enough to eat, whether the children staying there would have milk for their cereal. It is not a good look but it is very common today. Selfish hoarding, making sure I have enough, no concern for you...

On the other end of the spectrum, though, I remember a children’s time I led in another setting where I gave out various kinds of candy to the children, something parents always love... but I did so on the basis of gender, hair color, eye color, and similar characteristics. It was a

justice lesson tied to a prophetic text. Some children got more than others. But then, I told them they could share with others if they wanted to do so. Some of the “privileged” children walked back to their seats with their candy, saying, “It’s mine, I deserve it, and you can’t have it!” But many others willingly shared what they had.

Children tend to do better with this sort of challenge. Even if they have very little, they are willing to share. Adults have learned the ways of the world, meaning the ways of self-interest. The prophet Isaiah writes about a time when people will not learn of war anymore, apparently assuming that hatred and violence are not innate ways of being, they have to be learned (Isaiah 2:4). So it goes with selfishness and models of scarcity. They are not the most natural ways of being. Abundance and generosity are the default, especially for those who know Jesus and seek to follow his teachings.

But even before we get to the miraculous shift in thinking from scarcity to abundance, there is another miracle to consider. Someone has suggested that John’s description of the feeding of the 5,000 addresses the temptation to shrug one’s shoulders in the face of human need (Cheryl Bridges Johns, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 3, p. 287). Referring to the five loaves of bread and two fish, Andrew says, “But what are they among so many people?” It is how we often feel.

There is so much hunger, so much suffering and hardship, so much violence. What can we do? Jesus does say, “The poor will be with you always (John 12:8).” But he is quoting a verse of scripture, the second half of which says, “So, open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land (Deuteronomy 15:11).” The prevalence of suffering is not cause for complacency but incentive to act. If we function out of a model of abundance and generosity, we have cause for hope. But even if we cannot meet every need, we have a calling to do what we can, which requires a dramatic shift in thinking, a kind of miracle.

It’s what kept Mother Teresa focused on serving the poor, knowing there would always be more poor people. Asked how she kept going, she said, “I wasn’t asked to be successful. I was only asked to be faithful.” It’s what motivated Millard and Linda Fuller to start Habitat for Humanity in 1976, when so few resources were available for the

working poor to find decent and affordable housing. They dreamed of and worked toward a world where everyone has a decent place to live.

It's what motivates those who serve in our clothing ministry, helping thousands even though there are always thousands more. It's why we go to Honduras, and in the past, to Arkansas, Ukraine, Kenya, and other places. We can spin the globe with our eyes closed, put our finger on a spot, and find great need. What difference can we make? A great deal of difference for those we help! Realizing this is the first step toward transformation, and make no mistake, it often requires a miracle.

Union Presbyterian Seminary Professor Karen Marie Yust imagines how Jesus' question for his disciples about how they would feed the large crowd might play out in a present-day church (*Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 3, p. 284f). The trustees or finance committee might echo Philip's concern about a lack of necessary funds. The outreach committee or missions leaders might note that a limited amount of money has been set aside for similar projects and most of it has been spent already. The properties committee might express concern for all those people sitting on the grass or leaving too much garbage behind.

Church leaders serve out of a sense of duty, Yust says, or because they enjoy the work or contributing to a cause larger than themselves. They identify reasonable goals, make workable plans, and carry out their endeavors. But, she says, "Their work together is not viewed as a venue for God's glory and mercy to break forth in the world, but as a means to facilitate the congregation's survival as an organization. Their expectations and activities have lost their prophetic edge."

I do not think we have lost our prophetic edge completely, and attending to a congregation's survival is a good thing to do, but the church does not exist simply to survive. Being a venue for God's glory and mercy is our calling. Doing so may require some miraculous shifts in thinking — embracing a model of abundance, generosity and trust; and getting past the temptation to shrug our shoulders at the needs of the world, assuming there is nothing we can do to help. God can certainly work miracles in other ways, and we need to remain open to them, but if God can work these miracles within and among us, we can help shape a better world.