

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush,
Senior Pastor at East Liberty Presbyterian Church
Guest Preaching July 31, 2011 at Grace Memorial Presbyterian Church
“To See a Miracle”**

Matthew 14:13-21, <http://bible.oremus.org/?q|=178819903>

The gospel lesson has been read and it's the familiar story of Jesus feeding the 5,000. Out in a deserted, wilderness place, as the end of the day approached, the disciples wanted to send away the crowd. But Jesus fed them, having only five loaves and two fish at his disposal. It's the only miracle story found in all four gospels, so it merits our attention. But imagine if, at this point in the homily, a hand is raised in the back of the congregation, and a voice calls out, "Preacher, did this really happen?" There's one in every congregation; someone who loves to challenge authority and ask questions that have no good answer. If you answer, "Yes, this really happened", then comes the quick rebuttal, "How do you know?" – and soon a verbal battle between faith and skepticism breaks out, leaving most people confused and the worship service in disarray. On the other hand, if you answer, "No, it didn't really happen. It is an allegory about how God cares for the needy," then you lose just about everyone in the congregation who will mutter to themselves, "An allegory? I didn't come here to hear about Jesus the Allegory of God."

Knowing that there's no good answer to the interrupter's question, a second person speaks up and asks, "Preacher, can you tell us *how* the miracle happened?" That's still a hard question. Using ordinary language to describe an extraordinary miracle is bound to be difficult. But it's worth a try. Isn't that why Presbyterian clergy go to seminary for three years? So here goes.

Imagine on that day long ago a camera was mounted behind Jesus, and its wide-angle lens lets us see the whole valley filled with people: men, women and children. Scripture calls this location a deserted place, a wilderness of sorts. This is not taking place in a city; more specifically not in the city where King Herod was, with his throne and soldiers and a bloody sword that had just beheaded John the Baptist. That news has just been shared with Jesus. That is what sent him away to a deserted place, somewhere far from the long arm of the Roman law.

As the camera focuses on the crowds, it shows a variety of emotions present on their faces: expectancy, curiosity, people longing to hear a good word, people hoping against hope to be made well at last. Ever since the news got around of Jesus' healing miracles, the crowds following Jesus have grown larger and larger. People suffering from strokes and seizures, the lame, blind, and crippled – people pushed to the margins of society and treated like damaged goods. And right beside them were the good souls who carry the paralytics on their stretchers, who give a guiding hand to the lame and blind, who come ready to ask for healing for their spouse or child dying back home. They, too, have endured much pain; they, too, desire to be made whole, even if their wounds are not so readily visible. The camera shows this crowd surging toward Jesus and records that he had compassion for them and cured their sick. Jesus spent that day

in the deserted place listening as painful stories were shared, touching blind eyes, caressing tear-lined faces, comforting, healing – one by one by one.

The camera also shows the disciples, Jesus' followers who were near at hand, who were also busy amongst the crowd that day, listening, talking, comforting as best they could. And if we look closely enough, we see that they, too, long to hear a good word. They, too, have cast their lot, not with Herod's kingly power, but with this humble Prince of Peace. In doing so, they have left homes and family. They have slept on rough hillsides and felt their own stomachs rumble, missing the simple comforts of a home-cooked meal.

As a pastor preaching on this text, the next sermonic step is to acknowledge that we, too, are present in the crowd. We have illnesses, arthritis, and bad hips that make us lame and sore. We have cancers and diabetes, asthma and glaucoma; we have heavy hearts from broken marriages, dying or deceased loved ones. We've joined the crowd around Jesus with our own stories: stories about gunshots heard at night, addictions sweeping away our children, racism on the job and on the streets, politics without principle, economics without equality, and foreign wars without full integrity. Sometimes we're the ones who've been pushed to the margins, who long to be healed by Christ. Sometimes we're the disciples close at hand, doing the best we can yet still longing for a good meal, a soft bed, a bit of peace for our body and souls.

In the distance, the camera shows the sun drawing near to the horizon. The disciples looked around and saw that they barely had enough food to feed themselves. Maybe if 4 or 5 people needed a meal they could make the bread and fish stretch that far, but not 5,000 people. Then as now, the magnitude of the need overwhelms us. What can one person do? What can one church congregation do? But while we are fussing and fretting, the camera shows the crowd being seated in groups; and from behind we glimpse Jesus looking up to heaven, blessing the bread, and giving it to the disciples who hand it to the crowds. How were they all fed? That's the question we've been trying to answer. Scripture doesn't give us any details on this point. The camera doesn't pinpoint an answer. We see the crowds in clusters, units made up of different ages, different abilities, united solely by their common desire to be near Jesus. We see food exchanging hands – coming from the front, from the rear, from disciples' hands, and their own hands. They all ate and were filled. And baskets collected the extra pieces.

If we want to know how all the people were fed that day, we have to re-position our camera. The camera had been placed behind Jesus, looking over his shoulder, looking into the crowd as if we were CSI investigators, able to slow down the film footage and analyze the precise moment when a few loaves became a full meal for a crowd of thousands. We were being rational, not religious. We were being fussy, not faithful. But our mistake is that we were looking past Jesus. On that day in the desert place, if we want to see a miracle, we need a camera facing the other direction: placed behind the crowd, focused on Christ, the holy One of God.

And on that camera there needs to be a special lens, a lens able to capture the full authority present in Jesus' face, as opposed to the hollow authority seen in Herod, who

relied on violence even though any man or nation who lives by the sword will die by the sword. The lens should capture the furrowed brow and compassionate glance of Christ, as he scanned the gathered crowd and had compassion on them – just as it says in the prophet Hosea, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6). The lens should show this Good Shepherd telling the leaderless flock that they need not go away, for as in the 23rd Psalm, he has them lie down in green pastures. Or like the 78th Psalm, he answers the question of old, “Can God spread a table in the wilderness?” (Ps. 78:19). The camera should capture how the first act involved a glance up to the heavens, an act of submission, and trust, acknowledging the Father who art in heaven who gives us this day our daily bread. Then it should capture how the bread was broken, how the Suffering Servant gave away what he possessed so that others, all others, might be fed and made whole.

It’s true that from this camera angle it is even harder to see how the miracle occurred; harder to follow the movement of the bread from Jesus’ hands to the crowds seated in groups on the ground. But in another way, it is easier to appreciate the miracle because we see from whence it came and in what spirit it unfolded. We see that in the hands of Christ, meagerness becomes a bounty.

The first interrupter who asked, “Preacher, did this really happen?” simply wanted to start a rational argument about a super-rational event. If you’ve left no room for God in your question, how can you expect to find God in the answers you hear? The camera’s pointing the wrong way. The second interrupter asked, “Preacher, tell us how this miracle happened.” And while the wording may not seem that different, this question allows the camera to be re-positioned. Frederick Buechner said, “Faith in God is less apt to proceed from miracles than miracles from faith in God.” Our eyes don’t focus on the meagerness of the loaves we possess or the vastness of the crowds before us. Our eyes now focus on the hands holding the bread, blessing it, breaking it, handing it to us to re-distribute. Bread that is given in a setting that is unlike the world’s settings: no thrones, no hierarchies, no First Class and Coach seating, no “Me with the entrée and you with the scraps” dinner plans.

More importantly, from this angle, our eyes can focus on Jesus’ eyes, the one who has compassion and knows our struggles and doubts, our anxieties and our dreams. The one who listens to our neighbors’ stories, and asks us to listen as well; even as we are bold to share our stories, our prayers and cries from the soul. The one who feeds us but also says, “You give them something to eat.” The one who distributes the bread of life but also picks up the leftovers, because there is always enough if we see things from Christ’s perspective. The one who doesn’t just provide a meal, but who reconciles the world.

If you want to see a miracle, don’t look at the bread and fish, the few loaves you hold in your hands, or the huge crowds in need before you. Look at the One who is Lord of all, the host of the meal, the healer of souls, the Savior of the world. All else will follow from that.

AMEN