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“Miracles Happen”

John 6:1-21

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Introduction:

We have four Gospels in the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The miracles of Jesus feeding the multitude is found in all four. In fact, between the four gospels, this miracle is recounted six times. So, what does that tell us? Either this story is really important, or we must be really hungry. Perhaps both.

John 6:1-21

¹After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ²A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, ‘Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?’ ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷Philip answered him, ‘Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.’ ⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ⁹*‘There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?’* ¹⁰Jesus said, ‘Make the people sit down.’ Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were



seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹²When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, ‘Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.’ ¹³So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.’

¹⁵ When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

¹⁶ When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, ¹⁷got into a boat, and started across the lake to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. ¹⁸The lake became rough because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the lake and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. ²⁰But he said to them, ‘It is I; do not be afraid.’ ²¹Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land towards which they were going.

Sermon:

I have never been hungry. Not *really* hungry.

The crowds that flocked around Jesus knew what hunger felt like. They were colonized peasants; overworked, underpaid, and malnourished. They knew the agony of an empty table. They knew the agony of watching their children go to bed with aching, empty bellies.

I have never been hungry like that.

In 2011, before I moved to Roanoke, I spent three weeks with my previous church’s mission partners in southwestern Kenya. For most of my time there, I visited schools and the households of students—sometimes visiting two or three homes a day. In every home I entered, I was offered food. In every home I entered, someone else there needed the food more than I did. But that food was a gift. It was prepared with care and offered out of a place of generosity and love. To refuse that small fish on the plate or the live chicken meant for our supper would have been an insult.

My host family made a feast for their two American guests the first night we stayed with them. Then at every single breakfast and at every single dinner, they reheated the same pot of fish—day after day. The smell was unique. But they were doing whatever it took to provide their guests full bellies.

In contemporary western culture, it is much harder to honor food as a gift. In my monthly book club, we carry beautiful hors d’oeuvres to the hostess’ house. We nibble a little here and a little there, always afraid of appearing too piggy—and, at the end of the night, we carry our beautiful, barely-touched dishes home again.



I am not judging here. We have come by the problem naturally. Jesus' feeding miracles were meant to speak abundance into a culture of scarcity. But we—at least most of us, I imagine—live in a culture of excess. Excess messaging, excess packaging, and eating and drinking and consuming.

But then again, excess is its own kind of sickness.

Let's go back and consider some of the details from our passage for a moment.

John 6 marks a shift for the gospel. Chapter 5, just before it, completes the first cycle of Jesus' ministry. The last bits of John 5 involve a long conversation between Jesus and the religious leaders. It is a monologue, really, in which Jesus says, "You refuse to come to me to have life." He scolds the people that they believe the stories of Moses from the scriptures, but they do not believe him, here in the flesh. These words are sharp. And they don't just describe the Jewish leaders he's addressing. They can also describe us. I cannot begin to count all the times I fool myself into thinking I can find my own way to life. If I just make the right decisions, work a little harder a little longer, show a little more wisdom and grace, work out more regularly, eat more healthfully, get more sleep... *"Just keep going,"* I tell myself, *"and one day it will fall into place. One day it will be enough, you can have it all, you will find life."*

A few years ago, the National Academy of Medicine launched the Healthy Longevity Global Grand Challenge.ⁱ Its work strives to extend the human lifespan. The academy says they can envision an explosion of potential new medicines, technologies, and preventative strategies, just beyond the horizon, that could help transform the ways we age. They want not only a longer life, but longevity that keeps at bay bad knees and hearing loss, arthritis and weak hearts. The boldest among these doctors and scientists are not just contemplating extending the average lifespan, but even asking the question whether science might be able to make death optional. At a fundraiser in 2017, Dr. Aubrey De Grey, a biomedical gerontologist, shared that he believes we can retool our biology to stay in our bodies forever. In his mid-50's, he doesn't believe he will live long enough to witness this step toward immortality, so he has left instructions for his body to be frozen in liquid nitrogen so it can be thawed when the technology to achieve immortality (or, if you will, eternal life) is available.ⁱⁱ

There are two things wrong with this Grand Challenge. Not coincidentally, the same two things wrong with the ways of thinking we often follow—that we can work our way into being "enough" all on our own. 1.) Both of these ideas are ultimately impossible. 2.) Jesus is the source of life, life abundant, life eternal.

Jesus is always pointing us to God. In John 5:30, Jesus admits, "I can do nothing on my own." Why is it so hard for us to say those words?

We lust for control. We long for control. Any illness, job loss, or tragedy great or small reminds us just how precarious life is. In the last 24 hours, there have been two mass shootings in America. My heart aches at the precariousness of this life. Tomorrow it will be business as usual. We will lie to ourselves and fall into the same trap humans always do. We will try to arrange our



lives just so and, in this way, delude ourselves into believing that we really can be masters of our own destiny, captains of our fate.

The gospel reveals to us the difficult truth that we are not in control.

That brings us back to John 6. Our text begins with Jesus trying to get away from the crowds. The people had witnessed Jesus' miracles, and they saw in him salvation from political tyranny. They wanted more of his miraculous power, healing, and nourishment. When they saw his deeds, they perceived he was from God—and they wanted deliverance from Rome. They wanted to make Jesus king. But he would not be king on their terms. He said the words that are hard for so many of us to say: “No.” He said “no” to their ambitions and delusions of power and control.

Bread was a way for kings to enforce their power. The withholding of bread kept people in poverty. And when people are poor and desperate, they are easier to control. But Jesus does not keep bread from the people. He multiplies it. And his abundance disrupts the order of things.

Five loaves, two fish. John is the only gospel to include the appearance of a little boy with these gifts. The loaves he carries are small, and barley bread was the bread of peasants—the kind of bread you made when nothing else was available. And the Greek word John uses for “fish” is not the usual term we expect. It is a term that indicates that the fish were tiny.

Out of these meager gifts, Jesus is able to feed a multitude. What was leftover? Nothing less than 12 baskets full of food.

Since about the time John's gospel was written, people have tried to explain away this miracle. Perhaps the people there saw the generosity of the boy and were inspired to share what food they had stashed away. Perhaps someone did make a covert supermarket run, and thousands of mouths were fed. It's possible. And 5,000 fed, no matter how you explain it, is miraculous. But for me, no explaining or interpretive gymnastics are needed. Jesus showed up, and when Jesus shows up, miracles happen.

One of the distinct differences in this version of the story is that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all use the word “miracle” to describe Jesus' extraordinary works. John uses the word “signs” throughout the gospel. Where the other three gospels reveal Jesus as a little reluctant for people to realize who he is, John's story of Jesus describes a man who wants *everyone* to know who he is. Not for his own gain, but to teach us more about the glory of God. Jesus speaks more words in John than any other gospel, and he also *shows* us what it is we are to understand. In John, everything Jesus does is to show people who God is and how good God is. All of these miracles, these *signs*, are to point to God.

My friend Jennyⁱⁱⁱ points out that the gospels don't offer us any accounts of non-miracles or near misses. In the gospels, the miracle always comes.

And here's the hard part about reading these stories today. We are 2,000 years removed from these moments, these miracles. Do miracles still happen today? I am not hungry, but there



are hungry children—right here in our own city. To the best of my knowledge, I am not sick, but there *are* sick people—right here in our church family. Would it have been easier to believe if we had been right there in the middle of the action? Would these stories, these signs be easier to swallow if we'd been on the grass filling ourselves with the miraculous multiplication of loaves and fishes? Maybe.

I wish I could give you an equation or a fancier explanation, but all I know is 5,000 are filled. The storm is calmed. The paralytic walks. The demon is cast out. Lazarus is raised. God always shows up. That is not the same thing as saying, “We all get exactly the miracle we want, and we all live happily ever after.” But the miracle, in some form, comes.

After Jesus fills the bellies of the masses, Jesus walks on water. ¹⁶“When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, ¹⁷got into a boat, and started across the lake to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. ¹⁸The lake became rough because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the lake and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. ²⁰But he said to them, ‘It is I; do not be afraid.’” Gosh, do we need these words more than ever. “It is I; do not be afraid.”

“It is I.” Here is where translation trips us up again. The English translation doesn’t give the Greek rendering its true weight. Here in John 6, he tells his disciples exactly who he is—he is “*ego eimi*,” “I AM,” as in the great “I AM” that revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush. “I AM” parted the Red Sea. “I AM” fed them in the wilderness. “I AM” saved the remnant that would allow God’s people to continue. “*Ego eimi*,” this would not have been lost on the disciples—Jesus and the God of the Hebrews are one and the same.

Is this the king they were looking for? Is he the kind of messiah they anticipated? Would he bring salvation for his people in the ways they had prayed about for generations? From his very beginning in this world, Jesus has caused us to see things from a new perspective.

Here in these scenes, the disciples are asked to change their way of seeing. In the feeding of the 5,000, they are not asked to do anything but help the people sit down. Then, Jesus took the loaves. He did what he always does: he takes what is on the table and transforms it into something more.

Augustine had a phrase for explaining the connection of the spiritual to the tangible: “visible words.” He is describing the ways our sacraments, through water, bread, and wine are physical, tangible reminders of God’s grace. Jesus would have loved this phrase, “visible words.”

When Jesus fed the 5,000, he was acknowledging that we are physical beings with legitimate physical needs. He used visible, physical words for visible, physical people.

John 6 tells us that this all takes place during Passover. This is the second mention of Passover in the Gospel of John, three total (2:13; 6:4; 13:1) (which is, by the way, how we assume Jesus ministered for three years). And that detail matters as Jesus presents himself as the bread from heaven. “I AM,” Jesus said.



“I am the bread of life.” “I am the vine.” “I am the good shepherd.”

The people in the crowd were following Jesus because they knew they needed something.

We, too, are in need of something. We are desperate for someone to heal us, forgive us, accept us, and love us. We may think we are so different from the throngs that chased after Jesus and tried to mold him into something they could better understand. But Jesus and the miracles of Jesus are beyond what we can understand. If they were small enough and simple enough for me to understand them, they would also be too small and simple to transform me, let alone transform the world. Yet, that is the temptation of so many, to reduce the life and works of Jesus Christ to something we can wrap our heads around.

Love that feeds hungry crowds cannot be explained. Love that turns no one away cannot be explained. Love that causes one to sacrifice oneself for the sake of another cannot be explained.^{iv}

May these miracles, these signs point us to the wonder, to reclaim the wonder, of the God who made us, loves us, and saves us. “It is I,” says the Lord, “do not be afraid.”

ⁱ <https://nam.edu/initiatives/grand-challenge-healthy-longevity/>.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.kurzweilai.net/the-new-yorker-silicon-valleys-quest-to-live-forever>

ⁱⁱⁱ Jenny McDevitt wrote a wonderful paper on this text for our preaching group, *By the Vine*, May 2017.

^{iv} William H. Lamar IV, “The Word,” *Christian Century* (July 12, 2003), p. 17.

