

“Gonna Take a Miracle”

When reading or hearing well-known Bible stories such as today’s “Feeding of the Five Thousand” there is the risk that we are so familiar with the story that we fail to hear and recognize the most extraordinary parts. For example, as you listened to the story did it register that the group of five thousand followed Jesus from one side of the Sea of Galilee to the other? The Sea of Galilee is about thirty-three miles in circumference. That means the crowd of five thousand walked about sixteen miles to catch up with Jesus. Those were some determined folks.

What did you think when Philip responded to Jesus that “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little”? Individual income in the US is about \$31,000; therefore, we are talking \$15,000 worth of bread. That’s a lot of dough!

I am betting that if you pondered this passage for a minute or two you would also hear echoes of Psalm 23.

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters,*
he restores my soul.*

Did anyone hear something that reminded them of the Exodus story in this passage? How about when Jesus goes up the mountain just as Moses did? Does the multiplication of the loaves and fishes remind you of the manna and quail that fell from heaven for the Israelites wandering in the wilderness? Even the crowd’s desire to make Jesus their king seems reminiscent of when the Israelites made Moses their one and only interlocutor with God at Mt. Sinai.

Jesus’ walking on the water also has many Hebrew Bible resonances from God’s Spirit hovering over the deep and creating order out of that chaos in Genesis, to dividing the Red Sea for the Israelites in Exodus.

This passage is rich in references and overtones that point to the special nature of Jesus and his ministry. Even as we focus anew on this familiar story and we recognize the enormity of the feeding miracle, we still might fail to notice one essential character in the story. That is, the boy with the five barley loaves and two fish.

The boy with the loaves and fishes is so easy to overlook. He’s barely mentioned and then drops out of sight. But at least for the feeding part of the story his action of offering the bread and fish is the lynchpin to the narrative. Before he shows up we know there are a lot of mouths to feed, and that Philip believes the expense of feeding them is too incredible to even ponder. We think that Jesus has a solution, but it is unclear. It is at this point that the boy miraculously appears offering five barley loaves and two fish to help feed the crowd.

I imagine the scene this way. The boy saw the disciples conferring with Jesus and being curious about the discussion he got close to them. Listening in he got the gist of the conversation. Next he approaches the closest disciple, Andrew, and gives tug on

his cloak. Andrew turns around and the boy without any fanfare hands him a small package. Andrew opens it and sees two fish and five small barley loaves. Andrew turns back to the group and shows them what the boy offered. However, Andrew points out that this was not much with so many mouths to feed.

The story continues with Jesus giving thanks and distributing the two fish and five loaves among the crowd. As the miracle unfolds the boy simply disappears. We don't hear him ask for thanks, we don't know if he was amazed by the results. We don't even know his name, only that he was a boy who made a seemingly useless offering in the face of such a huge problem.

I find it striking that the one who shows up with the beginnings to a solution, and the vehicle for Jesus' miracle is a youth. The one paving the way is not a wise old man who knows Jesus can make a miracle happen with the right tools. It is not a Pharisee who thinks he is setting up Jesus for a fall by providing too little too late only to have Jesus turn the tables on him. It is not an angel come from heaven to work God's will and therefore glorify the Son.

It is important that the character with the loaves and fishes is a young person. Many of us grown-ups have become jaded by life. We focus on practicalities, hurdles, and costs much as Philip does in this story. We don't leave room for community, hope, love, or even, miracles. In contrast many youth still know that it is the action that is important not necessarily the magnitude of it. They know intuitively that a hug can change someone's life. They know that a pick-up game of basketball can create friendships. They know a game of jump rope will make a circle of friends in no time at all.

Their eyes are still wide open and not clouded by years of hearing "that won't work" or "we've already tried that" or "that is not the way we do things here." Their willingness to help seems boundless and is not weighed in a balance or against a cost/benefit analysis. They just engage, and have faith in their engagement.

And faith is what matters. Time and again Jesus said "Your faith has made you whole" or "Your faith has saved you" or "Let it be done according to your faith." I defy anyone to find Jesus saying, "Your cost-benefit analysis has made you whole" or "Your cynicism has saved you" or "Let it be done to you according to your clear-eyed plans."

It is our faith in God that heals, restores, and makes the way clear for miracles. It is that same faith that leads a young boy to give five loaves and two fish to feed more than five thousand people. It is the humility, guilelessness, hopefulness, idealism, and magnanimity of our children and youth which leads to miracles.

Instead of deciding in our very mature, world-weary, and all-knowing way that it is "gonna take a miracle" to solve a problem. We can take our cue from the boy in this lesson, and from our own children and grandchildren, and offer up what we have and leave the miracles to God.