

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

August 9, 2009 Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

II Kings 4:42-44

John 6:1-15

From Small Beginnings

Nine-year-old Danny came bursting out of Sunday school. His eyes were darting in every direction as he tried to find his mom or dad. Finally, he found his Daddy and ran to him and blurted out. "Man, that story of Moses and all those people crossing the Red Sea was great!" His father looked down, smiled, and asked his son to tell him about it.

"Well, the Israelites got out of Egypt, but Pharaoh and his army chased after them. So the Jews ran as fast as they could until they got to the Red Sea. The Egyptian Army was gettin' closer and closer. So Moses got on his walkie-talkie and told the Israeli Air Force to bomb the Egyptians. While that was happening, the Israeli Navy built a pontoon bridge so the people could cross over. And you know what? They made it!"

By now dad was shocked. "Is THAT the way they taught you the story in Sunday School?"

"Well, no, not exactly," Danny admitted, "but if I told you the way they told it to us, you'd never believe it, Dad."

With childlike innocence that little boy put his finger on the pulse of our sophisticated adult world where skepticism reigns supreme. With the advances of science and technology we operate more and more in the black-and-white world of facts, leaving no room for the miraculous.

In today's readings we get two different miracles:

- the story of Elisha, who in the midst of a famine feeds a hundred men with 20 loaves of barley bread
- and the story of Jesus, who when faced with a great crowd of hungry people - over 5000 men, women, and children - feeds them with five loaves of bread and two fish.

In both stories - despite these small beginnings, the hungry are fed, and there are leftovers - and in the story involving Jesus there is an abundance of leftovers - even more than when the feast first began.

The feeding of the great crowd, as John calls it, is the only miracle that Jesus did that is described in all four gospels. What is it about this miracle - unlike all the other miracles performed by Jesus - that catches the attention of all four gospel writers?

Well, I think in some measure, it's because there are many things we can learn - about Jesus and his power, or the disciples and their relationship with Jesus; but the aspect of this miracle which I want to focus on this morning, is that this story shows us that Jesus is able to take what is offered to him and to multiply it - so where at first it seems there's not enough - there ends up being more than enough.

Perhaps more than any other miracle, people have tried to figure out just how Jesus did this. Not unlike the little boy needing to make up a more believable version of the parting of the Red Sea.

The most believable theory is that when the boy who had the bread and fish shared them with others, his example inspired others to bring out what they had brought with them and share as well. Perhaps...

But explaining away a miracle so it's no longer a miracle is not the point of the Christian faith, and personally for me, doing this doesn't strengthen my faith.

How it happened is not that important.
What is important is that it happened at all.

So let's look at this story from that perspective of how from small beginnings, great things can happen.

Jesus is teaching on a hillside - there are over 5000 people there, and when evening comes he asks Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" Philip, ready with an excuse, replies "Six months wages would not buy enough bread to for each one to have even a little."

Immediately after this exchange, Andrew, who has found a boy with five loaves of bread and two fish among the crowd, pipes up about this discovery - but then adds - "BUT how far will they go among so many people?"

And so the scene is set for the miracle.
There is a great need.
And there are not enough resources to meet that need.

Sometimes we're faced with similar situations.
And don't we often respond as Andrew did?

- How can we help with what little we have? We don't even know how we will we make do ourselves.
- How can we feed so many? There are limited funds and the need is so great.
- What we can do is only a drop in a bucket. We can't really give enough to make much of a difference.

But Jesus, like Elisha, didn't listen to his disciples, rather, like the prophet, he took what was offered to him in faith, blessed it, and handed it back to his disciples so that they could distribute it.

And there was enough to go around. And there were leftovers - so many that there was more than there was to start with.

Which voice are we going to listen to in these stories?

The voices of the disciples, the servants who say when told to feed the crowd "there is not enough, it is impossible"? Or the voice of the one who tells us "feed the people" and who takes what we have to offer and makes it more than enough?

Mark, Matthew, and Luke all begin their account of the feeding of the great crowd by saying when Jesus saw the crowd he had compassion for them, that he cared for them. Jesus asks us to do the same - he asks us to care, to have compassion, and to go out into the world, and teach, and heal, and feed the people.

Actually it's stronger than that – we are commanded to feed those in need, to feed them with both the bread of heaven - that would be sharing Jesus, sharing our faith; and the bread worked upon by human hands, providing for people's physical needs.

And the good news is that we are not left alone as we live out this command. God's power is promised to us as well. All we need to do is to do is bring what we have, as the man did to Elisha, and as the boy did on the hillside to Jesus.

A colleague of mine tells of studying this passage when he was in divinity school. They were sitting around examining the background of the passage, the historical influences that impacted the story's development, theories about the possibility of its actual occurrence. Then someone turned to Paul Holmer, a curmudgeonly professor of theology and asked his opinion. He paused for a moment and then said, "Well, I don't know about all that stuff. I was just thinking that if Jesus could feed all of those people, perhaps he can feed me." (Martin Copenhaver, Stillspeaking Devotional, 7-30-09)

The story of the loaves and the fish shows us that God cares. But mostly, it shows us that what is small and insignificant in the face of this world's need can, when offered to God, be multiplied and provide for the world what is needed.

Miracles all have beginnings, and almost always those beginnings are small.

The story goes about a man named Mark who had received a special pre-Christmas gift from his brother. It was a beautiful new car - fully loaded with all the luxuries. On Christmas Eve, when Mark came out of his office, a street kid was walking around the shiny new car, admiring it. "Is this your car, mister?" the kid asked. When he replied that it was, and that his brother had given it to him for Christmas, the boy said, "You mean your brother gave it to you, and it didn't cost you anything? Free? For nothing? Gosh, I wish..."

The boy hesitated, and Mark knew what he was about to say. He had heard it many times over the past few days. He was going to wish he had a brother like that. But what the boy said shocked Mark.

"I wish," the boy said, "I wish I could be a brother like that."

It's about our hearts – to what, or rather, to whom have you given your heart?
I encourage you this week, to offer yourselves and what you have to God.

Remember, the smallest beginning can feed a multitude,
because in Jesus' hands a little goes a long way.
Amen.