

“I Believe in Miracles!”

Do you believe in miracles?

As people of faith we are supposed to believe in miracles. But do you? Do you really?

We live in a scientific age which, in a very subtle way, pits science and faith against each other.

Youth reach high school or college and say they often feel that they are being pushed to choose science over faith, because, faith, after all, is for people who aren't smart enough to realize that science rules.

Society tells us that there is a logical, rational, reasonable, scientific explanation for everything that happens in the world.

And while that may sound reasonable, the corollary of that statement is actually deadly to faith – since it posits that if something cannot be explained, it didn't really happen.

As Christians we are supposed to believe in miracles. But do we?

Today's story of Jesus feeding the 5000 is the story of a miracle, and yet many Christians, indeed many pastors, don't see it as a miracle at all.

Or they explain that the miracle was simply that everyone took food they had brought with them and shared it with one another.

I may have even preached a sermon like that at one point in my ministry, but if so, that was before I experienced miracles for myself.

Now that I have, I can totally believe that this was an actual, unexplainable, inexplicable miracle.

I believe that for several reasons.

First, it was important enough to be the only one of Jesus' miracles recorded in all 4 gospels – and in 2 of them it is actually recorded twice.

If this was just a story about people sharing food, it just doesn't seem that newsworthy to be so central to the gospel message.

Second, the text doesn't say anything about people sharing their food, and it doesn't have Jesus saying anything about sharing food, so making it about sharing food is adding something to the text that simply is not there.

Third, if it's only about Jesus encouraging people to share, what's the miracle that Jesus did?

No, this is Jesus' most famous miracles, which means it kind of tops the other ones like turning water into wine and walking on water and calming a storm.

All of those other miracles were about something that JESUS did that was extraordinary, something that broke the laws of nature, something that made it clear that Jesus was sent by God.

And finally, our entire faith is built on miracles.

We ground all we believe in the Bible, which is chock full of miracles.

The central story of Judaism is the Exodus – which is a miracle, and the central story of Christianity is the Resurrection – which is also a miracle.

And so, if we are going to believe in the miracle of the Resurrection, then there's no reason NOT to believe in this miracle.

If you want to believe it's about people sharing bread, go ahead,

but then you have missed the whole power of this story that tells us who Jesus is, and how God through Jesus through the Holy Spirit

can do unbelievable, incredible, amazing things that cause us to wonder and marvel and stand in awe.

So what does this particular miracle story have to tell us?

I think the first clue is in verse 15 where the disciples set the context, saying,

“This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late....”

It's been a long day, not only for the disciples, but especially for Jesus.

After all, he had come to this deserted place to get away from the crowds.

He had just learned that his cousin John the Baptist was dead,

and not only that he was dead, but that he had been murdered,

and not only that he had been murdered, but that he had been beheaded, and his head had been served up on a plate.

That is a lot of grief and agony and pain and fear for anyone to process, let alone for someone following in John's footsteps. So Jesus goes specifically to a deserted place where he will be alone, but the crowds follow him, and no matter what he was feeling inside personally, he had compassion on them & he ministered to them & healed them.

One by one, Jesus heals person after person after person. It took a long time.

And as it was getting on towards evening the disciples were ready to call it a night.

They were getting impatient and they just wanted Jesus to close up shop and move along so that they could all rest and recover.

They reminded Jesus that they were in a deserted place.

They reminded Jesus that the hour was late, time was short, and he needed to do something soon.

He needed to send the crowds away.

For whatever reason Jesus decides not to do that.

Perhaps he was thinking about the big banquet that Herod had just had at which John was killed, and decided to throw a different kind of party.

Maybe he wasn't done healing people and he wanted to give them something to eat while they were waiting their turn.

Maybe he just knew that they were hungry, and as there is no place near for them to get food, he wanted to feed them.

Maybe he wanted to teach his disciples something.

He tells his disciples to feed them! And they must have thought he was nuts!

There were 5000 people – or maybe 20,000 if there were 5000 men and 5000 women and 10000 children.

Maybe those numbers are exaggerated, but the point was

that the crowd was HUGE and all they had were 5 small loaves and 2 small fish.

Now here's where the story gets interesting.

The disciples give Jesus their small offering, and taking the 5 loaves and the 2 fish,

he looks up to heaven, blesses & breaks the loaves & fish, & gives them – the 5 loaves & 2 fish – back to the disciples.

Now notice that there is no talk about Jesus doing anything astounding here.

It doesn't describe Jesus all of the sudden being surrounded by 20,000 bagels!

There's no oo-ing or ah-ing from the crowd. There's no response of the crowd mentioned at all.

All it says is that Jesus took the 7 items the 12 disciples gave him, and divided it up among them – so probably about half of loaf and about 1/6th of the fish for each of them.

And the disciples begin to distribute what Jesus has given them to the crowd,

and again there is no mention of the miracle, except this 1 sentence: "and all ate and were satisfied".

This is a kind of hidden miracle, you see – like two of those we heard last week –

the seed that is planted and without great fanfare, grows,

or the yeast that is mixed in with flour, and without much fanfare, makes the bread rise.

This miracle of the feeding of the multitude is not so much a miracle for the crowds, as it is for the disciples.

Yes, everyone in that crowd was satisfied,

and maybe for many or most of those people in that day and age, that in itself was a miracle.

Most of us here eat and are satisfied every day, multiple times a day,

but back in that time and that place, as in many places around the world today,

not everyone got to eat enough to be satisfied, so that may have been the biggest miracle for the crowd.

But the real miracle was for the disciples, because they were the ones who kept giving pieces of bread and pieces of fish, to one person after another, to hundreds of people, and they just didn't run out of food.

This miracle story is like the one about turning the water into wine,

because most of the people at the wedding had no idea that the wine had run out, or how it had been replaced.

The only ones who knew how that new wine appeared were Jesus and his mother

and the servants who filled the jugs with water and the wine steward, and probably the bride & groom and their families.

The party guests drank and were satisfied, but knew nothing more,

but those behind the scenes who helped Jesus actually got to participate in the miracle.

There are some people who believe that the early church grew because people shared what they had with one another. But if that were the case, the Lutheran Church, which has the largest social service network in the entire country, should be growing by leaps and bounds. No, the miracle was not that people shared. The miracle is not that Christians share. You don't have to be a Christian to share.

The miracle is that Jesus takes the little we have, and works through us to transform us so that we, as individual Christians, participate in miraculous things. Sometimes what God does inside of us causes us to share, but it's not the sharing that's the miracle. The miracle is when we believe and trust and have faith that God is a God of abundance. Anytime we think that we're not in the right position, or that it's too late, or that we don't have enough energy or time or money to do what God requires, then we are not operating out of faith, but when we understand that Jesus could take five loaves and two fish and break them and give them to the 12 disciples and the disciples could feed hundreds of people each, then we can believe it can happen with us, too. When we believe that that miracle actually happened, then guess what? then that kind of miracle can happen in our lives, too. But if we believe it can't happen, then it won't happen. It takes faith. There's one more thing I want to point out in this story – these words: “and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full”. God not only provided enough food to satisfy every person there, Jesus wanted to make sure that the disciples knew that God doesn't just give us what we need, but that God gives us more than we could have ever expected. When all had eaten and been satisfied and had gone home, you can just imagine Jesus giving each disciple a basket and telling them to pick up the broken pieces of bread and fish that were on the ground. And each one of them ends up with a full basket, way more than those 5 small loaves and 2 small fish they had when they started out!

We have a choice.

We can just believe that this is a story about how human beings can be inspired to do good things and to share or we can believe that this is a story about the kingdom of God, the spiritual realm, the place where God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit are active in our lives, in incredibly amazing, awesome, and astounding ways.

We can choose to live in the kingdom of this world where sometimes people do good things, or we can choose to live in the kingdom of God where God does absolutely amazing things that take our breath away.

We can choose to live in the kingdom of this world where miracles can be explained away, or in the kingdom of God where God shows up and not only gives us all we need, not only satisfies us, but gives us far more than we can ever ask or imagine.

We can choose to live in the kingdom of this world, hoping that occasionally people will act with love and kindness or we can choose to live in the kingdom of God where miracles happen around us and in us and through us.

I don't know about you, but I know in which kingdom I want to live. I choose the kingdoms where miracles happen! Amen