

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller

August 12, 2018

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

II Kings 4:42-44
John 6:1-14

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 dad 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 getting closer and closer. So Moses got on his walkie-talkie and told the Israelite Air Force to bomb the Egyptians. While that was happening, the Navy built a pontoon bridge so the people could cross over. And you know what? They made it!"

Dad: "Is THAT really what they taught you 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."

And with that, Danny describes 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 miracles.

And today we get two similar 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 with Jesus there are leftovers - an abundance of leftovers in fact.

Interestingly, this is the only miracle that Jesus did that is described in all four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). THIS miracle - unlike all the other miracles performed by Jesus - catches the attention of all four of them. (More on that later...)

And perhaps more than any other miracle, people have tried to figure out just how Jesus did this. Kind of like the little boy needing to make up a more believable version of the parting of the Red Sea.

Perhaps, some say, when the boy who had the bread and fish shared them, his example inspired others to take out what they had brought with them and share as well. Perhaps...

But you know, 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. What's important is that from small beginnings, great things can happen, when placed in Jesus' hands.

Consider a situation where there is a great need, and there are not enough resources to meet that need. We know how that feels...Sometimes we're faced with similar situations. And don't we often respond the way 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, 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.

But still, we have these two competing voices:

We don't have enough!
Here...feed the people!

No way, that's impossible!
Here, hold my beer!

The question is...Which voice are we going to listen to?

Back to our different Gospel writers...You know how when different people tell the same story, they each put their own spin on it? Well, it's like that in the Bible as well. Four different people tell about Jesus on the hillside, with the thousands of people.... And three of them mention something that the 4th does not.

They tell us that when Jesus saw the crowd he **had compassion for them**, that he cared for them. And I think that's key here...

A colleague of mine tells about 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, their 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)

Compassion - caring - providing!

"God loves each of us, as if there were only one of us." (~Augustine)

He does! And as we are loved.... we are to do the same - he asks us to care, to have compassion, to go out and teach, and heal, and feed people.

Actually it's stronger than that - we are **commanded** to feed others, to offer both:
the bread of heaven - that would be sharing Jesus, sharing our faith;
and the bread that we make - providing for people's physical needs.

A couple of the committees I meet with here are reading a book by Bob Goff entitled *Love Does*. Yes! That's it exactly!

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.

Because, when we place something, even the smallest something, in Jesus' hands....miracles happen! And I think it has to do with compassion. When we allow our hearts to be moved, we can do far more than we think we can. When we have compassion - when we really care- not only CAN we, but we WILL.

I'm reading a book: *Beautiful Souls: The Courage and Conscience of Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times* (by Eyal Press). In Switzerland at the beginning of WWII, after Austria fell to the Nazis, the border between Switzerland and Austria saw a dramatic increase of Jews entering Switzerland. So the Swiss government began tightening their border crossings and rejecting Jews seeking entrance.

Well one border agent repeatedly admitted Jews (against orders) and was eventually discovered and fired. He and his family lived the rest of their lives in poverty. After a time, the man who oversaw the investigation and firing, decided to make inspections of the various border checkpoints. And what would happen is that when he made his visits, the number of Jews allowed in would INCREASE.

Guards in their offices enacted strict policies; but when they were AT the border with the people, they couldn't reject them, because they were moved by compassion.

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 the 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.

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

Amen.