

Psalm 145:10-18
2 Kings 4:42-44
Ephesians 3:14-21
John 6:1-21

Sermon for July 25, 2021

A BOY AND HIS BASKET

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Summary: The miracle of generosity

The so-called miracle of the loaves and fishes is the only miracle account that we find in all four gospels, in Matthew and Mark and Luke, and of course in the selection from John's gospel that we read today, and that fact alone shows how important this particular miracle seemed to the early Christian writers. The four accounts are similar in most respects. A huge crowd of people – at least five thousand, although that number may not include women and children – has gathered at a considerable distance from their homes to see Jesus and hear him teach. As the day draws towards evening, the disciples suggest to Jesus that they dismiss the crowd and allow them to go foraging for their own food in nearby towns. Instead, Jesus tells the disciples that they should themselves feed the multitude, and when the disciples protest that they have neither food nor enough money to purchase food for so many, Jesus takes five little loaves of barley bread and two fish, and multiplies them until there is sufficient to feed everyone, with enough leftover to fill twelve baskets.

This momentous event is usually taken as being the account of a physical miracle, like a magician drawing a rabbit out of a hat, and then another rabbit, and then a flock of doves, and then a bucket of KFC, and then a huge roasted turkey, complete with stuffing and all the other side dishes. And that's certainly a plausible understanding of the way the various writers describe the remarkable event.

And that also may very well be what happened on that evening long ago, although it does seem – doesn't it – to be a little hard to reconcile with the fact that this is exactly what Jesus refused to do during his temptations in the wilderness, when he refused to turn stones into bread. Nonetheless, if we want to believe in the sheer miraculous character of this miracle, we certainly do have scriptural warrant for doing so.

But for this morning, I'd like to suggest another possibility that involves a different sort of miracle, one that speaks more deeply to the nature and meaning of Christ's earthly ministry.

And to make that suggestion clearly, we must first think a bit about baskets and little boys.

Let's first read together John's account of the miracle.

John 6: 1-21

Let's first talk about baskets.

Most Jewish men, when they traveled far from home, carried with them a food basket, a small bottle-shaped basket called a 'kophinos'. They carried this basket with them partly as a matter of prudence – as someone going on a long hike might carry a sandwich and some trail mix – but also because Jews always carried their own food with them to make sure that anything they ate on the journey would conform to the strict rules of Jewish ritual cleanness.

It's almost certain therefore that each of Jesus' disciples had his basket, with at least some food in it. And the same is true of at least many of the men in the crowd. The accounts tell us that they had followed Jesus there from Capernaum, which would have been a journey on foot of over nine miles. It would have been very strange indeed if at least some of them had not bothered to put a little food into their baskets before they set out on their long and arduous hike. And that crowd of people from Capernaum was probably also swollen by others picked up along the way, people traveling from various parts of Northern Israel who were on the way to Jerusalem to participate in the yearly Passover, that John tells us was only a few days off. All of *these* people would almost certainly have had their little baskets of traveling food with them, attached to the waistband of their robes.

And now consider the little boy John tells us about, the one who had with him five loaves of barley bread and two fishes. Barley in Israel was a grain largely used for feeding the livestock, and bread made from it was eaten only by the poorest of the poor. The loaves made from it for traveling were very small, about the size of a golf ball. And the fish would have been the little pickled or smoked variety, like sardines. All that would have fit comfortably in the little boy's own traveling basket.

The Gospel accounts tell us that when Jesus instructed his disciples to feed the huge multitude, they reported that all they could produce was the five little loaves and fishes. But how did they come up with that food? It's very unlikely, isn't it?, that the disciples circulated through the crowd and found 4999 empty food baskets, and the one little boy who, alone among the huge crowd of men, happened to have brought his picnic lunch.

It seems to be a much likelier explanation of what happened that the little boy, perhaps having overheard Jesus tell his disciples to find food for feeding the multitude, instead went up to one of those disciples and offered to share his little lunch from his own little basket.

And what happened after that? This side of heaven, we'll never know for sure. Maybe Jesus really performed another miracle, like curing a leper or giving sight to the blind. And if so, it would certainly be perhaps his most spectacular, at least in size and scale and the number of witnesses.

But I wonder whether there might have been a miracle of an altogether different variety that happened that afternoon.

We must always remember that Christ did not come to *impose* his will upon the world. He did not issue commands, he issued invitations. His object was not to replace the world, but rather to change its nature from within, not to bring heaven down to earth, but to lift the world up to heaven.

And so I'm imagining that what happened that afternoon was something like this. The disciples were worried about how to feed such a large crowd and expressed their concern to Jesus. The boy overheard, and offered Andrew his own little basket of food. Andrew took the boy and his basket to Jesus and told him about it. I can imagine at this point Jesus looking at his disciples with a smile and saying, "Unless you become like little children, you'll never even see the kingdom of heaven. Become like this little boy; feed them yourselves."

And I can imagine the disciples sheepishly reaching into their own baskets and sharing out their own reserves with the people around them, and some of those people in turn reaching into their baskets and sharing with others, and again and again until the whole crowd was fed.

What we would be imagining here would certainly be a miracle of multiplication, but it would be a multiplication, not of the five little loaves and two little fish, but of the little boy's generous spirit, rippling out through the crowd until everyone was fed, and there was still plenty left over. And it would be a miracle that wasn't, so to speak, imposed on the crowd by supernatural means; but rather one that is elicited from the crowd itself, a realization by them of a power and a possibility that they had always had, but that no one had ever invited them to use.

In John's account, later that night, after the crowd had dispersed, the disciples climb back into their boat and start back to Jerusalem without Jesus. But the waters of the Galilee are rough that night and the disciples are struggling to make much headway. Suddenly they see Jesus walking on the water towards them. They're afraid, thinking it might be a ghost, but Jesus eventually gets close enough for them to recognize, and they bring him into the boat. And according to John, *immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.*

Sounds like another physical miracle, doesn't it? Instantaneous teleportation, perhaps; or maybe the boat rising on a magical hydrofoil and scooting across the water like the Road Runner.

But since we're imagining this morning, let's imagine that when Jesus got in their boat, the disciples discovered in themselves an assurance and strength and determination that had always been there, but which only emerged once Jesus was securely among them. They arrived back in Capernaum, if not instantly, at least for an early breakfast, perhaps of the leftovers from the day before, which they had gathered into their baskets.

At least most of us don't have the kinds of physical miracles happening around us that are described in the Gospels. The blind and lame are not healed with a touch; the wind and rain don't obey our instructions; our dead are not brought back to life with a word of command.

And surely our Lord made provision for a time when our faith in him would grow, not from personal experience of physical miracles, but from personal experience of ourselves, and the differences in ourselves that result from putting our faith and resting our hope on him.

And we don't even need to imagine that. After the resurrection, when Thomas required physical proof that Jesus was still alive, Jesus provided it, but then

added: *“Because you have seen me, [Thomas] you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*

And so our prayer for this morning, Father, is for the ongoing and never-ending miracle of transformation of ourselves.. Nourish the seeds of childlike generosity and yeoman-like determination and disciple-like confidence in our spirits. Cultivate those seeds with the loving concern of a mother diligently preparing her child for the best possible life, a life of perfect companionship with Jesus, in whose name we pray.