

Miracles We Can Believe In
Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church
14 January 2018 | Birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
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Mark 6:30-44

30 The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. 31 [Jesus] said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. 32 And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. 33 Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. 34 As [Jesus] went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

35 When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; 36 send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.”

37 But [Jesus] answered them, “You give them something to eat.”

They said to him, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?”

38 And [Jesus] said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.”

When they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.”

39 Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass.

40 So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties.

41 Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all.

42 And all ate and were filled; 43 and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. 44 Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

The Story of God for the people of God.

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I’m not sure really what to do with Jesus’ miracle stories.

I don’t understand how he could spit in mud and make someone see.

I don’t know how he heals with a single touch or exorcises demons or raises people from death.

I don’t know how they ended up with 12 *extra* baskets of food at the end of this one.

But I do love the humanity of this story. The little details we get about the people. I can picture it.

The apostles have just come back from their first assignment of teaching and healing in the villages.

They return from their mission with buzzy exhilaration, telling Jesus of all their work. They tell him what they've done, who they've taught. It was good work, but it was exhausting...they've been so busy they didn't even have time to eat!

Jesus, following the model of Sabbath, takes the disciples to a deserted place. It's the first church retreat!

But they are victims of their success and the people see them traveling and hurry to meet them, so that by the time they arrive to the quiet place, there are great crowds gathered.

Jesus sees the need of the crowd and has compassion for them. He cancels the disciples' retreat and starts teaching. That evening it gets interesting. The disciples know it's getting late and people are getting hungry. I can just picture them: "Wouldn't it be prudent, Jesus, if we let everyone go home so that they can get something to eat?"

They were expecting, I'm sure, for Jesus to say, "You're right. Let's call it a day." But what does Jesus say instead? "You feed them."

I imagine the silence that followed was filled with incredulity. And then the protest: "do what?" "Are you kidding?" "You want us to go *buy* food for this hoard of folks?"

And Jesus says the even more surprising thing, "No, just go see what you have."

Go see what you have.

I don't think that meant the disciples should do a public opinion poll.

They didn't put together a survey.

"Go see what you have" meant the disciples should go out into the crowds and talk to people, find out if they had any food with them and if they'd mind sharing it.

Suddenly the people aren't a huge hungry mob. They aren't lazy welfare queens or useless charity cases or from a country our president would rather insult than help or any other reprehensible and dehumanizing stereotype we can come up with to try to put distance between "us" and "them." They are people with gifts to share, with some small loaf of bread to offer to the common cause.

Now granted, the disciples' search only come up with five loaves and two fish, but they come up with *something*. Something is what Jesus can work with. He is able to take what they have and make it enough. More than enough, actually. For there are twelve baskets of bread leftover!

I'm not sure what to do with Jesus' miracle stories. I don't understand how he could spit in mud and make someone see. I don't know how he heals with a single touch or exorcises demons or raises people from death.

What I like about this miracle story in which 5000 men (and one presumes women and children, too) are fed, what feels real to me about it, is that Jesus doesn't swoop in like a superhero to save the day. He's not offering a silver bullet to solve all the problems. He doesn't just wave his wand and make a meal appear.

What he *does*, is have compassion and teach his disciples to have compassion too.

He teaches them to engage the people not as a hungry mass, but as individuals, communities of 50s and 100s.

Jesus doesn't conjure bread out of thin air; he gets his disciples and the crowds involved in pulling together a meal.

He doesn't set up an assembly-line feeding system, he asks them to sit in smaller groups and has the disciples go out and offer the food.

He leads them from being an anonymous hungry throng of people and a tired gaggle of disciples to a community of people, breaking bread together.

There is lesson here about our hidden abundance. All too often we're quick to note our shortages. The people were hungry. The disciples were tired. They didn't have enough food. They didn't have the funds to go buy enough food.

We do it too, as the church:

We don't have as many kids as we wish.

We have lost members.
We don't have enough volunteers.
Our building is in constant need of repair.

And we do it individually too:
My boss doesn't respect me.
There aren't enough hours in the day.
I'm helpless in the face of abhorrent statements by our President and a rising murder rate.
I'm just so tired.

In 2002, author Barbara Kingsolver wrote a beautiful book of essays as a way of processing the aftermath of 9/11/2001. In it, she writes, that it is hard to imagine a more frightening time than this. I feel that way now. Today. But she goes on to say,

I know someone has said that already. People said it a thousand years ago, and they've said it about nearly every minute that has ever gone by since. [She goes on] My generation's parents said it during the Cuban missile crisis, and *their* parents said it after Pearl Harbor. Mothers said it as they watched their sons ride off to fight in the Civil War, and they said it a hundred years later when black-skinned children had to be escorted by armed officers through the doors of an all-white school. The day Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered, or Gandhi, or Jesus, or Monseñor Oscar Romero, or the day the Buddhist monks immolated themselves in Vietnam while the stunned world watched—all of these were the worst there could ever be.¹

When that's how we feel, when the darkness of the events unfolding around us make reasonable to feel it's the worst it has ever been, when we get into that mindset, we often look for the miracle. We pray for the silver bullet. We wait for the superhero to swoop in.

What Jesus does is teach his disciples (and us) to have compassion, to start with what we have. Start with the resources and relationships we have, resources and relationships we can create, and abundance – more than we can ask or imagine – might just follow.

¹ Kingsolver, Barbara. Small Wonder. New York: Harper Collins, 2002, p. 21.

Some of you probably heard StoryCorps on NPR on Friday morning. Dion Diamond was sharing some of his life. He dubbed himself the Civil Rights activist you've never heard of. As a teen, Diamond held his own lunch counter sit-ins and snuck out the back when the police came. He was arrested multiple times and threatened by the police when imprisoned. He said he has three grandkids who aren't the least bit interested in his story.

But then he said this: "But any time I pick up an historical publication, I feel as though a period or a comma in that book is my contribution."²

We tend to tell stories around the charismatic leader, the superhero, the miracle. But the truth is that's not how change happens. We – you and me – are those small commas and periods. We have resources. We have relationships. We have access to abundance that we can't even see. We are the small bit of bread in the larger, miraculous story of God's unfolding abundance and the long arc of history that bends toward justice.

As director of NEXT Church, I have the privilege of traveling around to different parts of the country and different church communities. I get to see the wonderful abundance that follows when brave people of faith put aside what they are short of and start with the resources and relationships they have and focus on the relationships they can build.

Ten year ago, New Faith Church outside Columbia, SC was a dying congregation in a leaky old building. They had almost no one in worship. In a last ditch effort, they called a new young pastor, but that silver bullet didn't make the difference. What did make a difference is that pastor – Alice Ridgill and the session of that church – decided to start paying attention to their community. They starting praying and watching what was going on in the community and talking to people who live there. And they realized the predominant employer in that community was a factory that had shifts going around the clock. 11am worship Sunday morning was right in the middle of the day shift and bedtime for those who work the night shift. They shifted their worship time to 8am to catch shift workers. They now have a new building and a growing congregation. They paid attention to the resources and relationships right in front of them and a miraculous turnaround has taken place.

² <https://www.npr.org/2018/01/12/577343980/the-civil-rights-activist-whose-name-youve-probably-never-heard>

There is a small church in the midwest, barely making it. Their building is too big. Their town is too small. They scrimp by month to month and they long for more members. And younger members. At the same time, they have discovered miraculous abundance.

When they took time to talk with the folks who came to their church to get help with electric bills, and the food pantry, they discovered almost all of them had jobs and were drowning in debt because they couldn't get ahead of the predatory and usurious interest rates the payday lenders charged. The church realized, "We have small amounts of capital." And so they started offering small, community-based banking in the form of pay-day loans that are charged only a fee to cover the transaction.

We'll see what comes of it. The shortages in the church budget are still there. I don't know that as of yet they've had any new members join the church. I don't think they've started any programming for the folks who they help in this way. Their bank account isn't any richer.

But I do know that for the first time in a while members of that congregation feel a spirit of abundance.

Their weariness has given way to hope.

Their frustration at the lack of growth has given way to a spirit of kinship with their neighbors.

It is miraculous.

I should tell you, too, that I often share stories from Brown Memorial with others –

your commitment to strengthening the health of the real Baltimore through efforts like Turnaround Tuesday and the rebuilding of Oliver.

The youth in this congregation partnering with the youth in Sandtown.

The creativity you invest in worship.

Your recognition that music isn't just something to be gloried inside these walls, but in partnership with Eutaw-Marshburn elementary school.

The continual deepening of relationships among yourselves through education, relational meetings, healthy leadership.

Your willingness to work outside the box to support Tim in the transition over to Light Street and the potential revitalization of that congregation as a sister church.

You are examples of God's unfolding abundance.

I am under no illusion that any of this is easy – for you or for any other congregation finding faithful ways to navigate the rampant injustice and racism in the world today, the fragmentation of community, the increased polarization across our country, and the frenetic pace at which many of us live. It's actually really hard to find faithful and meaningful ways forward. It is really hard to insist on the building of relationships and community. To insist on abundance.

In this weekend when we pause to remember and give thanks for the life and witness of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr and the strength of character and dedication he showed and the miraculous legacy of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, let us not forget the power of all the small commas and periods. The children, the students, the lawyers, the brave sharecroppers, the funders, the politicians, the preachers, the house cleaners, the everyday people – the commas and the periods -- who made those miracles possible.

As we pause to think about leaders who inspire in our own day – Rev. William Barber, Ta Nahesi Coates, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, let us not forget that we are the periods and commas, the everyday people who get out into the crowds, to get to know people, to take stock of what gifts we collectively have to offer, and bear witness to the abundance that follows.

That is what the miracle of the loaves and fishes is about. Not a miracle of bread appearing out of thin air, but Jesus teaching his followers to find compassion, go out into the crowds to get to know the people, to take stock of what gifts they have to offer, to share those gifts and let the abundance follow...and I have no doubt – because I have seen it time and again – that the abundance that follows is more than what could have reasonably been expected from the resources we've put in. That's the miracle.

You noticed, probably, the familiar language in the scripture this morning. Jesus took the bread, looked up to heaven, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them to serve. The language of communion. Of the body of Christ broken for the world. The body of Christ embodied in us in this very world of hungry, needy people.

Even in dark days, in weeks of appalling statements from some leaders and silence from others. In times when we don't know the right way forward, may we trust the story of the loaves, this unbelievable miraculous story...and the abundance we find in it. Now and forever.

Amen.