

“Open to Miracles”
John 6:1-21
Sunday, July 26, 2015
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Nine-year-old Danny came bursting out of Sunday school like a wild stallion. His eyes were darting in every direction as he tried to locate either mom or dad. Finally, after a quick search, he grabbed his Daddy by the leg and yelled, “Man, that story of Moses and all those people crossing the Red Sea was great!” His father looked down, smiled, and asked the boy 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. They made it!

By now old dad was shocked. “Is THAT the way they taught you the story?”

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

The story of the five loaves and the two fish is the only story that is fully told, with few variations, in all four gospels. The story of Jesus walking on the water follows in all the gospels except Luke. The pairing of these two favorite stories of Jesus is important to the early church. These tales of miracles may seem impossible to our modern, scientific ears, but they are just as important for our faith. First, let’s talk about bread.

I. Bread (Communion).

Bread is a symbol of spiritual food, the body of Christ, His sacrifice for us. It is also a symbol of God's provision for His hungry people.

A loaf of bread reminds us of Communion, and manna in the wilderness, and Jesus, the Bread of the World. It reminds us of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, when the Evil One urged him to satisfy his own physical hunger by turning a stone into bread.

It is easy for us to quickly slide over the rich symbolism of John's gospel, because it is so foreign to us. We want to move on to feeding the people and setting up church programs to feed the hungry in our community and around the world. And the Bible is great in this regard; we have the gospel of Luke and many other books in the Bible to encourage us to care for the poor.

Jesus is not opposed to us reaching out to hungry people. When we give a loaf of bread to a hungry child, Jesus approves. When we reach out to a lonely person, Jesus stands with us.

But our relationship with Jesus is not about what we need, what the world needs, and how Jesus can fulfill all our desires like a Santa Claus or a genie in a bottle or a lottery ticket. John's gospel reminds us of this truth.

William R. Boyer writes on this issue: "Remember the old legend about the lighthouse keeper who knew that there were poor people living nearby, in hovels, who were cold at night because they couldn't afford oil for their heaters? He pitied them greatly, so he doled out to them the oil that was meant to keep the light lit. The people were a little warmer for a while, but the great light eventually went out, and, as a result, there was a shipwreck, and hundreds died. It is a good parable to illustrate how we can be so concerned to meet people's immediate needs that we neglect their larger needs. We need oil to keep us warm, but we also need a light to show us the way. We need bread, but we also need the Word of God."

Jesus is the Bread, the Word, the Light.

Jesus loves us. His intentions for us and for the world are good and right and just. Like a good shepherd he leads us. But we do not control when and where and how his purposes will be fulfilled.

We remain faithful followers, knowing that Jesus is the truth. We are his witnesses, sharing with others about who he is.

Will Willimon, one of our most well-known United Methodist bishops, exclaims:

“When will we ever learn? Christianity, following Jesus, is not merely another helpful means of helping us get what we want. Rather, following Jesus is the means whereby God gets what God wants. Jesus cannot be enlisted as another helpful therapeutic device to enable us to get what we want before we meet Jesus. The Gospel implies that we do not know what we want, what we need before we meet Jesus.”

One place where we meet Jesus is at the Communion table. When we break bread together, we remember that Jesus loves us and has commanded us to love one another (Jn13:34).

II. Fish (Baptism).

Along with bread, the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand also mentions two fish.

Everything in the gospel of John is highly symbolic. Fish are no exception.

You’ve seen fish symbols on cars and T-shirts and baseball caps and other Christian memorabilia. The fish has become a marketing icon. In the early church, however, it was a sign of faith and sacrifice and truth.

The Greek word for ‘fish’ is ‘ichthys.’ The letters of ‘ichthys’ form an acronym of titles for Jesus. ‘I’ is for ‘Iesous,’ ‘C’ is for ‘Christos,’ ‘T’ is for ‘Theou,’ ‘H’ is for ‘Hyios’ and ‘S’ is for ‘Soter.’ ‘Iesous Christos Theou Hyios Soter. In English it means ‘Jesus Christ, of God the

Son, Savior.’ This summarizes the truth that the gospel of John seeks to communicate.

At least 7 of Jesus’ disciples are fishermen: Peter, Andrew, James, John, Thomas and Nathanael, for sure. And probably Philip, too. He is from Bethsaida, which means ‘house of fishing’ in Aramaic.

Fish and fishing are very important to Jesus, to the disciples, and to the early Christians.

The fish is a symbol for Jesus. It is a source of food and livelihood for many people in the region of Galilee. It is a symbol of God’s provision for the physical needs of the people.

The fish is also a symbol of water. It reminds us of the waters of baptism and the grace of God in Christ Jesus offered to repentant sinners. As a symbol of baptism, it reminds us that through our baptism we belong to the family of Christ, the family of God, the family of the church. We are connected with Christians down through the ages, from the time of Christ to the present.

If we count the bread (5 loaves) and the fish (2 of them), we come up with the number 7, a very important number for the creation of the world. God worked for 6 days to create the heavens and the earth. And on the 7th day, He rested.

III. Water-walking (Creation).

Water-walking also hearkens back to the story of creation. As “the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters in the Genesis account (Gen. 1:2),” so Jesus moves over the face of the waters in John’s gospel account. Jesus is, with God the Father, and God the Holy Spirit, the Creator of all that is. He brings order out of chaos, being out of nothingness, life out of death. He says, “It is I; do not be afraid.”

The crowds get it wrong. They do not see Jesus for who he is. He is not an earthly king. He is divine; he is the Word. “...and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in

the beginning with God” (Jn 1:1-2). He is the Creator. He is to be worshipped as Lord and God.

The disciples get it wrong. They do not recognize Jesus when he walks by on the water. And once they do recognize him, they want to control him by bringing him into the boat. They, too, miss the point. He is divine; he is the Word; he is the Creator. He is to be worshipped as Lord and God.

God cannot be controlled. We cannot predict what God will do among us and through us, if we cooperate with the movement of his Spirit.

Jesus reigns over all of heaven and earth. The question of miracles is really beside the point. The important question is, do we see and recognize Jesus for who he is? And if we see, do we receive and accept him as our Lord and Savior? Do we confess our sins, receive his forgiveness, and leave our lives in his hands?

Lew Smedes writes: “As a boy, (Jesus) engaged in dialogue with learned men, all ripe with scholarly ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’; but, we are told, they wondered at him. He boggled people’s minds all his life. Common people saw him and sensed that there was more to him than met the eye. Common sense said, ‘We see only a carpenter’s son.’ But he said, ‘If you see me, the carpenter’s son, you are looking at God.’ And when he said it, people wondered” (How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong?).

John 4:24 says: “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” John 3:8 says: “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Jesus is not predictable. The power of God cannot be boxed or bottled or contained.

The central point of John’s gospel is this: Jesus is the Son of God.

Closing.

There's an old fable about a young bear cub that was puzzled as to how to walk. He asked an old she-bear, "Shall I move my right paw first or my left, or my two front paws together, or the hind ones, or all four at once, or how?"

In reply the old she-bear growled, "Leave off thinking and just walk." Sometimes that is what God says to us. Quit analyzing the problem to death and get moving. Sit down.

Acknowledge that God has a plan. Make a beginning. (King Duncan)

We are the church. We are Christ's body in the world. The love we share with each other is the love of Christ, and it is enough love to feed the whole hungry world. Not because of who we are, but because of who He is!

In Communion we see Christ, offering his body and blood for our sakes. In Baptism, we see the Holy Spirit, confirming our acceptance into the body of Christ through God's grace. In Water-walking, we see the Creator, moving over the chaos of the world, bringing life out of nothingness.

Jesus, through his Holy Spirit, abides in our hearts -- each of us, gathered here today. The people gathered around you, in this sanctuary, represent the love of Christ. They carry his love for you. Through their beautiful faces, Christ comes to your aid, striding across the chaotic waves of life to tell you, "It is I. Do not be afraid."

My hope for you today is that you know you are cared for. God in Christ Jesus is a big God, bigger than all the impossibilities you face. With Him, all things are possible. People get fed. Water gets walked on.

Your boat arrives on a new shore, filled with hope and promise.

Amen.