

NOVEMBER 22, 2020

Marion

weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“Connecting people with Jesus Christ so all can experience his love and joy.”

SERMON November 15: “It’s a Miracle! Feed Me!” John 6:1-14, Mark 8:1-13

This week as we continue our series on miracles, we see yet another interesting set of circumstances. The miracle itself is a pretty famous one. Feeding the multitude. The short of it is that a large crowd had gathered around Jesus, who was teaching them, after a fairly long time it became evident that they were hungry, and out of a meager amount of bread and fish, Jesus is able to feed thousands of people. All four gospels record that feeding of the 5,000.

In addition to this multitude, Matthew and Mark also include another instance of feeding the 4,000. In both accounts, Jesus is teaching and healing. The timeline is different however in terms of the feeding. In the 5,000, this unfolds within a day. The crowd follows Jesus, and it gets late in the day when naturally anyone would be hungry. In the 4,000, Jesus says “they’ve been here with me for 3 days”, indicating that at the very least some folks hadn’t eaten for a much longer span of time.

Some other details that are interesting separate the two accounts, and we’re going to find that this may be significant in interpreting the miracles. Feeding the 5,000, it’s the disciples who say the people need to be dismissed so that can go buy some food. In the 4,000, it’s Jesus who is looking to provide food because He Himself says “they have nothing to eat.” In the 5,000 Jesus says nothing about the presence or lack of food. In fact, according to John, we see that clearly there was food among the crowd as in his account the loaves and fish come from a boy.

The significance here is that often we assume two things. That Jesus noted their hunger when the multitude was fed, and that Jesus did it because He Himself declared “they had nothing to eat.” Jesus declaration that there was no food to be had only happens in the account in Matthew and Mark. In the one shared in all four gospels, it’s the disciples who are the prime movers in getting the people fed, and they themselves don’t say for certain no one has anything to eat. It’s assumed on their part, and so often assumed on ours.

The more familiar reading imparts that in both the 5,000 and 4,000 Jesus multiplies the food. In the feeding of the 4,000 this, I think, is absolutely what is communicated. Jesus takes a meager amount from the disciples, and makes a whole lot out of a whole little. He takes compassion on this crowd that has stuck with Him for days as He’s ministered and taught. We get the impression here and in the other account that whatever miracles He worked in terms of healing were accompanied by the blessing of teaching them what His message. And remember, the miracle isn’t the message. The miracle is intended to point us to the message and give credibility to Him. The message, of course is Jesus. What is the message then here in the miracle?

Perhaps the simplest is that Jesus is sufficient for us. What we need, at the core, in the end, bottom line, is Jesus. People were sick. What did they need? Jesus. People were hungry. What did they need? Jesus. We are sinful creatures in need of redemption. What do we need? Jesus. But there is something deeper here. Jesus refers to Himself as the “bread of life”. He tells His disciples He has “bread” they know not of. In these stories, Jesus is the source of sustaining bread. As He shares that He is indeed the “bread of life”, we know that what He is sharing is far bigger than simple food. His Spirit is the sustaining force of our lives as we endure the trials we face day by day. As we feel overwhelmed and weak, in His Spirit we find strength and hope. More than bread for the body, Jesus is bread for the soul.

Jesus tells the disciples that His food is to do the work of the One who sent Him, the work of God. Our ministry and mission is bread freely provided for us. This work is life giving if we embrace it fully.

This is further driven home in Mark after the feeding of the 4,000.

They got off the boat, and Jesus gives them a statement intending to give them insight into what true faith looks like. He warns them about the “yeast”, clearly playing on the whole bread motif. The disciples miss the point. Totally. Jesus is frustrated. “How thickheaded are you? You’ve been with me all this time, you’ve seen what I can do, you know that I’m a walking pantry of physical bread to eat. You saw me feed thousands, you think I can’t feed you? Sheesh!”

What follows in Mark is a series of miracles and teachings. The very next miracle is curing a man of blindness. Coincidence? I think not. Have the disciples eyes been opened? Maybe.... Then Peter declares Jesus as the Messiah. Breakthrough! Jesus reveals He will die. Peter bounces back “No you won’t! I won’t allow it!” “Get behind me Satan” is Jesus’ reply. Sadly Peter and the disciples still haven’t figured out what being the Messiah means. And Jesus continues to work on getting them on board.

They couldn’t grasp this idea of getting away from the “yeast” of the Pharisees. This bread metaphor is beyond them. Arguably they were so caught up in their assumptions about the notion of Messiah and their conquering vision of the future that they were functionally blind to what Jesus was trying to say.

Yet what He was saying is of ultimate significance. This yeast that penetrates us is the idea that we can work our way into the Kingdom of God. If we follow the right rules, do enough good, then we’re okay. Yet tis isn’t the case. Last week Bob led off his message reminding us that not one of us is perfect. We rely on grace, the grace of the Messiah for redemption. The works are our response to that gift of grace. They had it flipped. It’s not works gain grace. It’s that grace produced works.

Having it flipped is what leads to all manner of judgment towards one another. We make our list of works and hold one another up for evaluation against them. Judgment towards one another brings judgment from God which is kind of the wrong direction.

If there is a “yeast” of Jesus that He’s trying to get them to understand it’s that they need to be based in grace and let love and mercy flow outward from it. They were focused in the physical bread He had provided, not paying attention to the spiritual bread He had offered. Remember, two times they had spend, total, at least 5 days listening to Him teach the masses that He’d fed. They saw the miracle, not the message.

But remember, there are some details that matter, not unlike some of the details that led to another interpretation of the parting of the Red Sea. Some have suggested that on the occasion of the feeding of the 5,000 it could have been a physical miracle of the bread or a spiritual miracle of the heart. The bread is simple, we've already looked at it. So what of the heart?

Here's two details that have been noted. First, no one in the scripture said there was no food. In fact we know that at least this boy had some. Second, all Jesus did was offer thanks and give directions to distribute. Here's the what if.

What if you had a huge crowd, and everyone was feeling hungry. And everyone was feeling stingy.

A long time ago, when I was a teenager, I was given this scenario. Three guys were sitting together. One guy pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Drew one for himself and offered one up freely to the other two even though he only had a few left. The guy sitting in the middle went to take one and the third fellow started condemning them both. "How dare you tempt him by causing him to violate his body which is the temple of God!" They sit there a while longer and the one who did the condemning decided he was feeling a little dry in the mouth. He turned away from the other two and pulled out a pack of life savers, hiding them so he wouldn't have to share and snuck one in his mouth.

Which one exhibited the spirit of Jesus more?

When we don't know what someone else has, and we fear they may want some of ours, especially if we really want it, the temptation is there to hold out, or hide what we've got. Until something moves our heart. Until that little miracle happens.

Where did the food come from in John? It came from a boy. Not the disciples. Not from Jesus. From the most unexpected place, a boy. Rather than hoard it for himself, he offers it freely. Jesus gives thanks. And is it possible that as the disciples distributed, the rest of the crowd, moved by an act of selflessness and exhibiting the very grace and sacrifice that Jesus may have been teaching them about for the afternoon, began to share as well and pass along portions of their food.

Many of us can relate to this. We are giving in to some self-centered attitude or action that in our heart is at odds with what the Spirit is calling us to. Then we see someone else do what we know we should be doing, and we are moved. God speaks through that person's faithfulness to nudge us to do what is correct. In that moment we are transformed to something better and greater, and we choose God's will over our own. Miracles of the heart that teach a valuable lesson. If this was in fact the case, they learned that when they shared there was more than enough for everyone. When they allowed the bread of life, of Christ, to be consumed by their spirit, the physical bread they needed was plentiful. What we see in this less familiar interpretation is a wonderful extension of what we talk about when we talk about the sufficiency of Jesus. Yes, there is that individual, personal, sustaining relationship with have with Jesus spiritually. And that love, strength, and grace is sufficient to carry us when our own love, strength, and grace are failing.

At the same time, we see that we are part of that sufficiency for one another. God uses us as we respond to the grace of Christ to look out for one another, to have compassion on one another, to love one another. In this not only do we have the internal experience of the Holy Spirit that is sufficient to sustain us, but we have those used of God around us who help us in our circumstance to fill in those missing gaps in our lives and who we are.

It's both experiencing the compassion of Jesus and extending that compassion to one another. God's plan of sufficiency and sustaining is far more complete than we imagine. We are both given the Spirit to sustain us within, and used of God to sustain one another in the more tangible, practical situations in the world around us. In all of it, it is God who is supplying and purposing us to accomplish God's desires and design. To give a current example right here in Marion, look no further than what has happened right here this past week.

When was the last time you went into someone's home who didn't have enough to eat, Jesus rang the bell, came in, and "poof" their fridge was filled? When was the last time you heard of that kind of thing? None of us have. Yet that doesn't mean that food doesn't still multiply.

We had our drive thru meal on Tuesday. We put out 180 meals of which 70-75 were given to families who couldn't donate anything. Which is fine. It's why we do this kind of thing. Yet from those who could, the donations that came in exceeded \$1,000. More than enough to cover what we put into the meal.

Far more significant, however were comments that John heard as he passed out the food.

"God has put you here for a reason".

"Thank you so much, thank God for you all."

"This is the only hot meal my kids will have this week."

"Thank God, we can have food for a couple days now."

Their food multiplied. They had little to nothing. Because of God's faithful, you all, with one stop at the curb, they were fed.

If you look in the vestibule you see the stacks of boxes of food from our neighbor who delivers donations to us ever few months. It just happens that it's also Harvest Home. A miracle of timing. Carl and Janet went to pick up food collected by the Scouts. They were told they'd have about 6 or so boxes for us. They came back with 25 and that's after giving about 8 or so to a food pantry that they overheard was running low.

We had nothing. Now we have a lot of something. It multiplied. And it will go to serve families who need it. Where did it come from? It came from people willing to experience a miracle of the heart and give what they have to people who do not.

When you and I allow ourselves to participate fully in this sufficiency, we are fulfilled. We have a sense of divine mission. We are empowered and humbled. In grand form, we not only know the story of the miraculous in scripture, we are invited to become part of that story in our time and lives. As we experience the miracles in our own hearts and lives, we become part of the miracle in someone else's.

BIBLE STUDY Nov. 18, John 6

John 6 is quite a long chapter. Rather than fully unpack the two miracles at the beginning, I'm referring you to two recent sermons preached. One was Jesus walking on water and literally last weekend we looked at Jesus feeding the multitudes. You can find video of this archived on our Facebook page, and you can find the text of these on our website. Still, just a couple notes about these two miracles.

Feeding the 5,000 is the only miracle that appears in all four gospels. This is significant because it tells us that this event was an important part of the early Christian tradition and likely familiar to those early converts. It is also thought that this event was often paired with the walking on water miracle as a kind of "Galileean pair" of miracles. As such, it would have been odd to not record them together.

The two are linked by an interesting verse that tells us that Jesus removed by Himself because they "wanted to make Him king." This is interesting, particularly as this chapter unfolds. In fact it is a sign of just how dense the people were to Jesus' message, and explains His exasperation many times throughout His ministry. Over and over again they miss and confuse what is being communicated.

We understand that Jesus comes as a king, but a king unlike any other. He is royalty above all, and while ultimately He does rule all, He came not as the conquering hero, but the suffering, sacrificial servant. Here, however, He understands that based on a simple miracle, the people are willing to elevate Him to the status of an earthly king, and if they have any inkling of His Messiahship, they misunderstand it as the more militant type. Jesus doesn't even entertain this. Perhaps exhausted from the miracle He'd just done, anticipating what was going to occur next, or just weary from the misunderstandings, He steps aside.

This is a great example of something we too often dismiss in Jesus, His humanity. If we consider Him fully God and fully man, we have to accept that Jesus experienced the gamut of human emotion and experience. We simply also acknowledge that He overcame it. Nevertheless, frustration, exasperation, and exhaustion are very human experiences. Perhaps what we see here is one of those moments where Jesus overcomes temptation to give in to whatever frustration might have been cropping up by stepping aside. We hear often that when our temperature rises emotionally, take some time alone to cool off. While it's impossible to relate to His divinity, there is comfort in being able to relate to His humanity.

Adding to this, we see this confused fickleness. They want to make Him king because of one miracle of food. They recognize Him as a prophet in this chapter. Then they disbelieve His message. They ask Him for a sign to prove Himself yet we're told they followed Him because of His healings and they witnessed His multiplication of food. While Jesus stays consistent, the people can't quite get on a congruent path or attitude.

Once again, isn't this all too common? Jesus is the fixed point set to guide us. He is unwavering. His message is clear. Love, forgive, show compassion, and so on. Yet we are swung by circumstance and emotion. We are tempted to compromise based on convenience and to be fair, real need. In moments of pressure or fear we are tempted to excuse or justify attitudes and actions that do not represent Jesus. What is comforting is that we know that Jesus and His mercies are reliable and true.

A detail in the feeding of the multitudes is part of John not only relating the story, but also setting up an important theme in the chapter. They gather up the scraps left after the meal. This is a subtle (or maybe not so much) reference to the manna in the wilderness. In the Old Testament, as the Israelites were fed from heaven by the manna, they were told to gather up whatever they didn't need for the moment, because otherwise it would rot and spoil. It was food that would "perish."

This manna/bread imagery is important as the rest of this chapter unfolds. We're going to focus on the remainder of it thematically. Jesus uses this image of manna, as the people gathered clearly see some kind of parallel with that and what they've just experienced the day before on the hillside. "Moses gave us manna." Jesus corrects them. "No, God gave you the manna, but I'll give you bread that doesn't perish, bread that gives you life eternal." We'll see shortly that they don't grasp this.

First, let's acknowledge something incredibly bold. This may be in any of the gospels the earliest and clearest moment where Jesus reveals His identity. There is a lot of pinballing language about Father and Son here. Let's break a few of them down. Jesus makes Himself equal to God: He reveals His origin is not from earth, but from heaven. He claims to have seen God, and to be the only One to have done so. He claims to be sent directly from God, and to have a divine mission as such.

Jesus claims to be life giving: "I am the bread of life." Jesus tells them that the real food that will sustain them is Himself. Both in this life and the next, Jesus claims to offer what they need for eternal life.

Jesus claims the power to resurrect: "I will raise them on the last day,." This implies both this power as well as the authority to judge who will and will not be raised to life. Not just life, but life eternal.

It is this last one that offers another layer that is wonderfully comforting. This claim is in the context of not losing those that the "Father has given to Me." It is also in the context of not refusing anyone who comes to Him. It is an affirmation that when we come to Jesus He claims us. We belong to Him. In belonging to Him, we can rely on Him to make good on this sustaining promise of being the bread of life and raising us to eternity with Him. We can rely on Him to always be there. Even if we walk away from Him, if we choose to return He is ready, willing, and glad to receive us into Himself.

All of this is a deeply spiritual sense of Jesus' identity and what it means to us to be in relationship to Him. Yet the people are still stuck in the physical realm. This shouldn't come as a surprise. All through this gospel thus far we've seen Jesus trying to use physical terms like bread and water to convey spiritual truths. All through this gospel we've seen the people He's talking to confused and unable to break through the physical understanding to receive the spiritually significant message.

This shouldn't be a terrible surprise. His people were under the covenant of the Law. They were under an understanding that right standing with God came from following rules, in other words works. This is revealed in the people's early response to Jesus. "What works must we perform?" Jesus' response is clear, yet falls on deaf ears. "The work of God is to believe in the One He has sent." In other words to believe in Jesus Himself. Again, here is a clear reference to His identity.

The "work" is to believe. Let's be fair here. For how many of us, even believers, is this a difficult thing to grasp? It's not about earning, but receiving. Many of us are rightly taught that we need to work for what we want. We need to be productive and contributing, and not to expect something for nothing. This is necessary to make our way in life in our careers and often in many of our relationships. It's necessary if we want to excel in any field, skill, or activity. Which makes it difficult to transition to this attitude that surrounds grace.

"Certainly God doesn't give such a huge prize away for nothing." Yet God does. Redemption is a gift. We need to receive it. Still, while we can't earn something freely given, there is a sign as to whether or not we've received it genuinely.

If we can't earn the gift by our works, the sign of receiving it is revealed through our works. "Believing" isn't a mere act of acknowledging Jesus' redeeming work. It is in truth committing to Jesus. Committing is a whole different sensibility. It is what is embodied by the expression that we make Jesus "Lord of our life." If Jesus is Lord of our life, then we follow Him faithfully. We allow Him to direct us and give us purpose. It is an intentional relationship. If we have a statement of faith, yet after making it pay no attention to Jesus, He has not been made Lord of our life. At least not in our own eyes.

A point brought up in one of our discussions this week is noteworthy. There is a difference between Jesus' factual position in the universe and whether or not we recognize it. Jesus is Lord. That is a statement that is true. Period. That said, we still have the free will to acknowledge it or not. The fruit of our lives bears out whether or not we do.

So Jesus takes the bold step of revealing Himself to this group of people. As His discussion continues, we see Him launch into language of flesh and blood. They didn't get the "bread" idea, so He switches gears here.

John's gospel is different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke in many ways. One such way is that at the last supper, there is no mention of communion. Instead John focuses on foot washing. That doesn't mean that John's gospel is devoid of communion imagery. We see it right here in chapter 6. "Eat my flesh, drink my blood."

This drives home the sense of fully accepting Jesus. It clearly points us to belief as an act of full commitment and embrace in relationship. Take me, what I have to offer, fully in to who you are. In this we find eternity. It is a well of spiritual truth contained in an illustration using the physical. It doesn't go over well with the people. They are horrified. Stuck in the physical, they essentially hear Him inviting them to cannibalism and vampirism. Once again, however, let's have some grace with these folks. They can't be blamed for not getting this communion imagery. Remember, the crucifixion hasn't happened yet. There is no reference point for it. And if they missed the spiritual implications, it is understandable why they would be horrified at Jesus' suggestion.

When they reveal that they can't accept what He is saying, Jesus gives them the key to understand it. "Flesh is nothing, spirit is everything." If they would apply this in retrospect they might have evaluated it again and grasped something of what He was saying. They did not.

This brings us to another cautionary point. Most of us have experienced a situation where we've heard something that is so harsh or offensive that we tune out whatever the person speaking says next. I would suggest this is what happened here. What they heard was so off putting to them that they tuned Jesus out. In doing so they missed that little nugget He offered that could have helped them unlock the meaning behind His illustration. This is good to remind us that just because something has been said that is wildly out of bounds in content or attitude, it doesn't negate that whomever said it may still have something good to offer. What is important is that we manage ourselves in a way that keeps us humble and open. If we do this, we can glean something from almost any circumstance or conversation. God is speaking in every moment, but it's up to us to be mindful and open to hear it.

Still, the largest part of those gathered abandons Jesus. The twelve are all that is left. Jesus asks if they too will leave. Peter answers for the group that they know who Jesus is and are with Him. This moment is more than just those that left. It invites us to consider what it was that kept the twelve around.

The twelve had something the rest of those gathered did not. They had much more time in with Jesus. They had heard His teaching over and over. They had travelled with Him. They had eaten with Him time after time. They had witnessed far more of His signs than this crowd. In other words, they had a much stronger foundation of relationship that was based on honest time and engagement.

Remember, Jesus noted with the crowd that the only reason they came to Him again was that He'd filled their bellies. Their motivation was shallow. The twelve were with Him over time and had committed to Him. The superficial relationship fell away at the first difficult teaching. The deeper relationship forged in honest time stayed firm.

This is valuable. Works don't earn salvation, but the depth of our faith is determined by what work we are willing to put in to it. Faith with the greatest potential to endure even the harshest moments of life doesn't happen on its own. Faith that is able to confront reality with honesty and still stay strong, even get stronger, does not happen on its own. It occurs when the individual is willing to take the time to study, pray, worship, serve, and get to know Jesus. To embrace Him not just for what He gives, but to participate with Him in service to build God's Kingdom in the world.

One final note that puts us into chapter seven. Jesus is delivering this message in a synagogue. We know that in Judea, the priests and leadership were plotting to kill Him already. To say what He has in a synagogue simply amplifies His boldness.

Even so, we keep in mind that He is in Galilee, not Judea. Judea is the stronghold of that leadership seeking His demise. Likely He wasn't in a lot of danger in this moment in that regard. Still, there's nothing to say someone in that group couldn't have made the journey to Jerusalem and given more ammunition to fuel the plot against Jesus' life.

To that effect, we continue to see moving into chapter seven that Jesus is no fool. It tells us that for a time He went about Galilee as that was the safer place for Him to be as the plot continued to stir.



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