

THE MAKING OF A MIRACLE

Sermon prepared by The Rev. Ralph W. Bayfield, D.Min.+, August 2, 2020
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Our Gospel lesson from Matthew describes the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand men, women and children by Jesus and the disciples. I should like to share some words written by the renowned Scottish New Testament commentator William Barclay that can give us some insights and understanding about this miracle.¹

There are some people who read the miracles of Jesus and who feel no need to understand. You may remain for ever undisturbed in the raw sweet simplicity of your faith. There are others of you who read and your minds question and make you feel that you must understand the meaning and significance of the miracle. Do not be ashamed for a lack of clarity for God understands your questioning mind. But in whatever way we approach the miracles of Jesus, one thing is certain. Professor Barclay declares, “We must never regard the miracles as something that *happened*,” that means only years ago. We must always regard the miracles as something which *happens*. The miracles are not isolated events in history; they are demonstrations of the always and forever operative power of Jesus Christ. As Dr. A.T. Mollegen of the Virginia Seminary used to say, “The miracles of Jesus Christ take place in the everyday ‘red hot here and now.’”² There are three common ways in which we can look at the miracle of the *feeding of the five thousand*.

¹ Barclay, William: *The Dailey Bible Study, The Gospel of Matthew Volume2*; Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1958 *Mtt.14: 13-21* pages 113-114

² Mollegen, A.T., New Testament class, cited from memory. RWB

(1) We may look at the miracle as a simple multiplication of the loaves and fishes. That would be very difficult to understand: and it would be something which happened once, and which never in this world repeated itself; but if we regard it that way, then let us be content, but let us also not be critical and condemning of anyone who feels that they must find another way to the understanding of this story about Jesus and the disciples. By the way, the disciples are not just the original twelve followers of Jesus. The word disciple means *follower*. So all of the people who were present at that meal, and all of us who today follow Jesus Christ are His disciples.

Some years ago, there was an Episcopal minister who was Rector of a Church in a college town. The minister and his wife were very involved in the college and the town, The clergyman taught a course and helped coach the football team at the college. The Glebe House, given to the Rector and his successors in 1738 was good sized, so the clergy family had many students come for meals, and some even lived with them. On Wednesday mornings before classes, there was Holy Communion around the Dining Room Table. The Eucharist was followed by a small breakfast, juice, coffee or tea. There was a wonderful bakery in town that made the most delicious pecan cinnamon buns. So the climax of the breakfast was the sacrament of sticky buns!

The parish hall was built for suppers, The kitchen had five stoves, three refrigerators, huge tables and cabinets. Throughout the year there was the Ham and Oyster Dinner, the classic Turkey Thanksgiving Dinner, The Christmas Roast Beef Dinner, the Lenten Suppers. The Easter egg hunt, followed by the Easter Feast. Those dinners were open to the community and they came! The Rector's wife had been a home economics

major in college. She loved to cook and entertain. It was said about her, she fed the five thousand without benefit of miracle!

(2) Many people have seen in Jesus miracle of the feeding of five thousand people as a sacrament. They have felt that those who were present had only the smallest morsel of food, and yet as they shared that food they were filled, strengthened for their journey of life and were content. Those people have felt that this was not a meal where people sat and were gluttonous about their physical appetite; but it was a meal where they shared their meager portions and ate the spiritual food of Christ. That being so, this is a miracle which is re-enacted every time we kneel at the Lord's table and receive the Eucharistic bread. These moments become to us a spiritual food which enables us go out, walk with firmer feet, more meaningful minds, and greater strength on the way of life that leads us to be closer to God.

(3) There are those of us who see in this miracle something which in a sense is perfectly natural. Yet in another sense the feeding is a real miracle. In any sense the *feeding of the five thousand* is very precious.

Picture the scene. There is the crowd; it is very late; and they are hungry. But was it really likely that the vast majority of that crowd would set out across the lake without any food at all? I can recall traveling across southern France in third or lower class on a train. It was a wooden car, more like a cattle car than a passenger car. There were benches and many people and children sitting on the floor as the steam driven engine chugged on. The car rocked from side to side. But every family had brought some-

thing to eat. There were Salami rolls of meat seasoned with garlic. They sliced it right there and passed it around. There were loaves of local baked bread, and bottles of red wine with cups. The women had brought these huge bags full of food for the trip. There was no dining car. In Biblical times, there were no MacDonalld's, Burger Kings, Pizza Huts, Taco Bells, or whatever eatery. No fast food restaurants; therefore, would not the people have brought something to eat with them no matter how little? Now it was evening and they were hungry. But as Professor Barclay points out, *they were also selfish*. No one would produce what they had lest they had to share it and they would not have enough to feed their own families. Rather than share their scanty provisions they tended to keep things to themselves.

Then Jesus took charge. He took what He had, two small fishes and five loaves of bread. Jesus began to share this with a blessing, an invitation and a smile. Jesus took the five loaves of bread, gave them back to the disciples and instructed them, *You feed the people!* Thereupon, all the people began to share with each other. Before they knew what was happening there was enough and more than enough for all.

If that is what happened, it is not the miracle of the loaves and the fishes; it was the miracle of the changing of selfish people into generous people at the touch of Christ. It was the miracle of the birth of love in grudging hearts. It was the miracle of changed men and women with something of Christ in them to banish the selfishness of their hearts. If that be so, then in the very real sense, Christ fed them with Himself, and sent His Spirit to dwell within their hearts.

It does not matter how we understand the *miracle of the feeding of the five thousand*. One thing is certain- when the Risen Christ comes into our hearts; our weary souls will be fed. Thanks be to God! *AMEN*.

COLLECT FOR PROPER 13

“Let your continual mercy, O Lord, cleanse and defend your Church; and, because it cannot continue in safety without your help, protect and govern it always by your goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.”³ AMEN

FOR THOSE SUFFERING FROM THE CORONAVIRUS

O God of heavenly powers, by the might of your Son’s command, all sickness and infirmity that He met was driven away. May your healing mercies be with all those suffering from the Coronavirus now enveloping the people of your world. Comfort and relieve the suffering that weakness and sickness may be banished, strength restored, good health returned and cure come to your children and servants. Inspire the scientists to find a vaccination that will destroy this evil virus and end its reign. Bless all those working in the government, the medical and emergency fields, keep them safe and protect them. We thank you for your many blessings and mercy through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

A THOUGHT FROM HENRI NOUWEN:

“We may be little insignificant servants in the eyes of a world motivated by efficiency, control and success. But when we realize that God has chosen us from all eternity, sent us into the world as the blessed ones, handed us over to suffering, can’t we, then, also trust that our little lives will multiply themselves and be able to fulfill the needs of countless people?”⁴

³ *Prayer Book and Hymnal*; Church Hymnal Corp., NY 1986, page 232

⁴ Nouwen, Henri; *Life of the Beloved* : Crossroad Publisher, New York 2002; quoted in *Synthesis Year A*_: Proper 13, Tradition; PNMSI Publishing Co.Boyd, Md., August 3, 2014 pg.2

