

“Gratitude and the Gracious Plenty”

Ephesians 4:25—5:2; John 6:1-21 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words with your Spirit of gratitude, that our fears might be soothed, our faith revived, and our souls nourished. In Jesus’ name we pray,

Amen.

So last week, as you likely recall, we read the whole 6th chapter of John’s gospel and discovered that there’s a lot going on in there. We’re spending these next three weeks looking at shorter sections, starting at the beginning, which we just heard. It’s good to read the whole chapter, so we can get some sense of the context and the continuity of the narrative. But there are other levels of the context we should remind ourselves of as we dive in today.

First of all, it’s interesting to notice that “The Feeding of the 5000,” as it’s called, is the only miracle story that appears in all four gospels, other than the resurrection, of course. You will recall that we sometimes refer to Matthew, Mark, and Luke as the synoptic gospels, because of their “synopsis” style of story-telling, in contrast to John, who frequently interrupts the narrative with long theological reflections and prayers. This is probably another part of the reason John didn’t get its own year in the lectionary. But what’s ironic about that, when we look at this story in particular, is that John’s version is clearly the best. The life of a story is in the details, right? All the gospels tell us that there were five loaves and two fish. But John is the only one who tells us that

those loaves and fishes came from a little boy. In the other gospels, they're just around, like maybe stowed away in one of the disciple's backpack, or a random person had left them sitting out on a rock or something. But we love this little boy, don't we? If we tell the story, we're almost always going to make sure we mention him, because the idea of him sharing his provisions – which someone had perhaps packed for him and admonished him not to eat all at once – open up so much depth and possibility in the background of the story.

The other important contextual feature to notice about this story in John is not about what's in the story, but about what's not in the rest of the gospel. John is the only gospel that doesn't tell us about the Last Supper. Instead of Jesus gathering in an upper room to share a meal with his disciples, we have the story of him washing their feet. With that Last Supper scene missing, this story of the Feeding of the 5000 – in which Jesus takes the bread and blesses the bread and breaks the bread and gives the bread to all the people – in many important ways becomes John's version of the Eucharist.

Now, we are, of course, not just looking at the Feeding of the 5000 today, because we also read that section about what happened later. There's a lot less detail there. You might have thought John would have explained a little more about the conversations the disciples had about getting in the boat and heading across the lake without Jesus. How did they decide to do that? Did he tell them to go on without him? How did they think he was going to catch up? Doesn't it seem like an odd thing for them to do? He was their leader; why would they take off without him? For the sake of argument, let's say

they'd rented the boat over in Capernaum and they were going to have to pay a fee if they didn't get it back by midnight. So when they couldn't find him, they decided they had to go on ahead. Maybe someone was going to walk back around to fetch him, or rent a smaller boat and go pick him up. Surely they had a plan, right?

But then, it turns out they didn't need a plan. The wind had picked up and was making the water rough, so maybe they'd sort of forgotten to wonder where he was, because they all had to focus on keeping the boat afloat. But then here he comes, walking across the water, like of course he would catch up before they got there; he's Jesus, after all, old Mr. "Do not be afraid; it is I."

It never worked of course; they were always afraid, at least for a bit. And here we are, in the first 21 verses of John, slightly stunned ourselves by two miracles in quick succession, trying to figure out what we do with all that. This was the first problem we identified last week: what do we do with miracles? Some of us, I'm sure, are content to believe in them, without having to make sense of them. They help us focus on the divinity of Christ and the life-giving abundance that emanates from Jesus as a revelation of God's presence in our midst. And that's beautiful.

But others of us cannot find rest in that. So this might be where we come back and say "Thank heaven for that little boy!" Because he opens up a new way of understanding what happened on that hill side. You can imagine that most of the people in that crowd had brought some provisions with them that day; they knew they were going to be out and about for a while. But when the disciples put out the call to see who

had anything they could share, only this little boy who “didn’t know any better” would offer what he had. There is no way of telling if his five loaves and two fish would have been considered a snack or a hearty meal. But however long it was supposed to last him, he offered it up. And Jesus gave thanks for it. And we can imagine that somehow, this loosened up the drawstrings on everyone else’s lunch sack, and suddenly, there was more food than the crowd could eat. We have seen miracles happen that way before, haven’t we? We didn’t necessarily label them miracles, but in retrospect, they certainly could have been called that.

We can try to explain the feeding of the 5000 this way, if we need to. This method doesn’t work as well on the walking on water story though, does it? If we tried, we could, no doubt, imagine that while the disciples thought Jesus was up on the mountain praying, he was actually walking around the Sea of Galilee, praying on foot, and got there first, and then walked out through the surf to meet them. There’s nothing in the text that suggests such a thing, but you could imagine that if you had to. Or, we could try what Marianna suggested last week, and consider these miracle stories a “roadmap for living with wonder.”

What does it mean to live with wonder? I would think it would involve being open to being surprised, recognizing that sometimes things happen that we never would have imagined possible, understanding that we can never see all the possibilities, even if we think we’ve catalogued them all. It means admitting that while we’ve known some people for a very long time, there are always parts of them we haven’t met yet, that could

emerge one day and throw us for a loop if we don't offer them the freedom to be fully who they are, even if it doesn't match our expectations. It means giving ourselves that same freedom. Living with wonder means confessing that we don't control nearly as much of our own lives as we would like to pretend, but also seeing that that doesn't have to be scary but can, in fact, be a blessing sometimes.

There is a basic dynamic described in these two miracle stories that give us a huge clue about how to live with wonder. If you look ahead to verse 23, you'll see that the place where the feeding of the 5000 took place is now referred to as "the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks." This is in contrast to the end of verse 19: "and they were terrified." What we have here is the difference between gratitude and fear. When Jesus first asked "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" everyone who heard him probably got anxious. "Oh no, I just have those two rolls and some cheese; am I going to have to share?" "Does he need that extra five dollars I stashed away for an emergency?" "Are we not going to get any dinner?" But what did Jesus do? He didn't count everyone and very carefully divide up every crumb so every person got a tiny morsel. He gave thanks. And everything changed. He gave thanks, and the bread was broken open to feed the world. He gave thanks, and the anxiety melted away. He gave thanks, and hunger was satiated. He gave thanks, the five loaves and two fish became a gracious plenty. He gave thanks, and there were leftovers!

If we're going to talk about the role of the Holy Spirit in this story – or in miracles in general – we would not be mistaken to consider the contrast between gratitude and

fear. When we are overcome by a spirit of fear, of anxiety or even dutiful concern about scarcity, very little is possible. Such a spirit traps us, holds us in place and slowly sucks the life out of us. But if we can welcome in a Spirit of Gratitude, possibilities open up. We can see how God is doing a new thing, and generosity is restored. If we want to understand the miracle of Jesus walking on water, perhaps the most important thing to notice about it is how it reminds us that the power of thanksgiving illustrated in the earlier story can overcome the fear momentarily expressed when the disciples saw Jesus coming toward them over the waves. This is how we live in wonder, we pursue that spirit of gratitude and refuse to allow our fears to limit where we go.

I was struck by this when I sent out the weekly email this past Friday night. It was late, as I'd been busy working with our Helix volunteers to prepare everything for Welcome Saturday. I confess that I recycled the devotional message. But I still wanted to prime you for this morning, so I put a title on the email that referred to this story. Except the line is actually from Matthew's version of the story, not John's. In Matthew's version, Jesus says to the disciples, "You give them something to eat." And I'm sure it made them anxious. But as I typed those words Friday night, I realized there's more than one way to read that sentence. There is the way it's originally said in that story: "You give them something to eat," as in, I'm telling you to do this. But what if what I was saying is "You give them something to eat," as in, You do, I've seen it, you've been feeding the 5000 for almost 8 years now, and there is so much gratitude. So much gratitude.

There are many ways we can choose to relate to the miracle stories in the Bible. We can accept them without questioning and rest in the mystery. We can use our God-given imaginations to try to make sense of them. We can reflect on their metaphorical meaning and see what larger lessons they are teaching us. But perhaps the best way to relate to miracles is to follow the example of that little boy and get involved with them. You give them something to eat. You give thanks. You let go of your fear and open your heart to wonder. You give thanks. You share what you have. You give thanks. You collect up what's leftover, so the miracle can continue to spread. You give thanks. Let's give thanks! Hallelujah and Amen!