

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
July 29, 2018
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A Hat Trick of Scripture

If you are a hockey fan you will appreciate that today we have what I will refer to as a “Hat Trick” of scripture to draw upon. We have David and Bathsheba showing us what greed, lust and evil can do to even the most elite in society. Next we have Jesus feeding the 5,000 showing us that generosity and care for your neighbors can yield miraculous outcomes. And finally, at the end of the Gospel, Jesus walks on water and magically transports Himself, the disciples and the boat in an instant to where they were going. Where to start, where to start? As the preacher, trying to answer the question, “What is the scripture message for today?” is a challenge.

The message I gleaned from the story of David, Bathsheba and Uriah was this: Even the greatest among us, those chosen by God to be anointed and lead us, can fall into temptation and are subject to evil. At some point we all look out for ourselves and put our wants and desires ahead of everyone else. No one, not even David, escapes the temptations of sin. No one is perfect. Everyone falls into sin, even priests.

Sin has a way of locking us into a cycle that is difficult to escape from. A pattern of self-serving acts that often lead to earthly wealth and pleasure is a tough cycle to break and puts a strong lock on our souls. Love and redemption are keys to that lock, and we only need to use them to free ourselves.

I think that love is also the key to understanding the Gospel today. John gives us two miracles to ponder—first, Jesus feeds the 5,000+ and later that night he walks on water! Passages that describe miracles like these require us to take an extra dose of faith to begin to digest their meaning, and our Gospel today is certainly no exception.

When we hear the story about 5,000 people gathered to hear Jesus, I want to note that only men were counted, so this story could really be about the feeding of 5-15,000. If you have ever been to Israel you may have visited the Church of the Multiplication on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, first built in 350AD. There is some dispute about whether this is the actual site, but if you ever stood outside the church and looked across the large open fields that lead to the edge of the sea, you can easily imagine thousands of people gathered, sitting in the field listening, waiting for an opportunity to see and hear Jesus.

I mentioned David and the self-serving behavior that overtakes us and leads us to sin. The good news here is that we are also, loving and nurturing people who care about each other. Jesus was Jewish, and one of the principles the Jewish culture was based upon is the idea that if everyone in the community thrives, then everyone benefits. This means that helping your neighbor start a business, or lending resources to another so they can harvest their crop or build a shelter means they will be able to afford to buy the goods and services needed from others—helping each other actually helps ourselves. Creating a community that encourages each other and helps each other thrive takes courage and trust—trust that there is enough for everyone if we do not destroy, squander, and hoard the resources God has given us out of greed.

What really happened that day in the field at the edge of the sea? Did a few loaves of bread and fish really multiply into a feast that fed thousands of people? Later that evening did Jesus come walking across the water and transport the Apostles and the boat instantly to their destination after hours of rowing against the waves? I think both of those things happened, but perhaps not in the way it seems to be magically portrayed in the scripture. I love the story of Jesus walking on the water, and I think

that just because something never happened before, it does not make it impossible—anything is possible with God. Between the two miracles in today’s Gospel, I am willing to have faith that Jesus did walk across the water as a sign to the disciples that he was the divine Son of God. The question about Jesus walking on the water has been debated for centuries, scientifically explained and disproven many times. I only know I am open to the possibilities and the questions, but that I will not have a conclusive answer in the next three minutes.

I am more interested in exploring the miracle of how 5,000+ people who came together and were fed by a couple loaves and fishes. What do you think happened? People had gathered from everywhere—visions of Woodstock enter my head when I try to picture it—people of different races, cultures, and trades, came together. There were certainly some Roman soldiers as they were occupied, some leaders, shopkeepers, travelers from foreign lands all in one place on a hill. Jesus was there. Love was there. Jesus told the disciples to feed the people. When Andrew noted the boy with five barley loaves and two fish, I bet there was a tone of sarcasm and frustration in his voice. Jesus tells them to make the people sit down—that alone was not easy. Jesus gave thanks and distributed the food to those seated in the field.

Have all of you taken a road trip and packed more snacks than you needed? Think Shrine Mont! Packed your lunch for work, had groceries in the car on your way home? Imagine the group gathered on that day. It is likely there were some fishermen, bakers, women with water jugs from the well, shepherds with their provisions for the fields, merchants, vineyard owners, farmers—people of all colors, creeds, professions, and walks of life gathered. Jesus gave thanks and shared what he had. I like to think that the miracle that day was that all of the people gathered, shared what they had with each other, made it possible for everyone to eat and be satisfied because they wanted everyone to thrive. They treated each other with love and respect. They believed in God, they were there to see Jesus, and they were inspired by the Holy Spirit to share their gifts. They had heard the teaching, experienced the fellowship and broke bread together. They were not out for themselves but sharing with each other in peace. Jesus Himself gave them the example to share what they had with one another, and that day they demonstrated what it meant to love their neighbors as themselves. They respected the dignity of all people and everyone who ate was satisfied. They gathered 12 baskets of surplus when they had finished—the word from the Greek is actually translated more closely to abundance—the people gave from their abundance, and an abundance was left over. The account of the feeding in these terms outlines our Baptismal Covenant. The people were the miracle that day to each other.

What does this mean to us? Are we the miracle someone is waiting for? When we give our time, our talent and money to make sure Holy Cross is here now and for generations to —we become the miracle someone is looking for. We are the hands and feet of Christ in the world, and respecting the dignity of all people, loving and helping others to thrive through making coffee, feeding the hungry, providing service to the homeless, weeding and watering and caring for the facilities, and everything we do is how we live into our Baptismal Covenant. Sharing as Jesus did on that day in the field—we become the miracle.

Most of you know that my Dad died last week and I wanted to share a story about him that kept popping into my head as I wrote this sermon. He was a car dealer, and owned or managed many businesses in his career. His last business was a small car lot with a repair shop and convenience store attached. In northwestern Pennsylvania there are farms full of fruit and produce to be picked from Ohio through Pennsylvania and into New York, and because of this there are migrant workers who would pass through the area as they picked their way through the harvests. One late summer afternoon, Dad came home in the middle of the day and took a pressed white shirt out of his closet, and was headed back to work—I asked him why he came home for a shirt. He said that a guy and his family—not of his culture, education, or social circle—were having car trouble and stopped to see if Dad’s shop could fix the car. Dad said their car was shot, but he had a pretty good used car he could sell the

guy. I asked again about the shirt, and Dad stopped, and told me the details. He said the man had his wife and couple of cute little kids with him—he of course gave them candy out of the store. While they were waiting for the car they were buying to be prepped in the shop, the man and Dad were working out financing. Dad took the old car and \$500 as a deposit, and the man promised to pay him the balance of a few thousand dollars when they passed back through town at the end of the harvest season. The man told Dad that he had a chance at the next farm to become a foreman, but he had to get there early to speak to the farmer. My Dad asked him if he had something nicer to wear than his work shirts, but he did not. That's why Dad ran home, to grab one of his own nice, pressed, shirts. He wanted the man to succeed, to thrive, to be able to better care for his family, and yes, it might help insure that Dad received payment for the car at the end of the season—money he used to support us. That day, my Dad was the miracle that family needed.

Life is never in our control. We are always at the mercy of God and the laws of nature, and no breath is ever promised. God is merciful, and knows that we are flawed, human, worldly, self-righteous sinners, but God loves us just the same and calls us to Godself. What we can control is how we respond to one another, and the best we can do is to respond with love. Love God and each other, seek forgiveness when we harm others, and support each other on this wild ride of human “being” on this earth. Seek to be the miracle for each other. Amen.