



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, July 29, 2018

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

FR. ALAN GIBSON

II Samuel 11:1-15 | Psalm 14 | Ephesians 3:14-21 | John 6:1-21

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Do the miracle stories in the Bible ever leave you feeling discouraged? For me, sometimes they do. These stories are supposed to have the opposite effect. They're intended to inspire us with a sense of hope and faith. But what are we to take from Jesus walking on water? At the end of his gospel St. John says there were "many other things that Jesus did" that were not written in this book. Personally, I find it unfortunate that the walking on water episode is one that was recorded. It does little more than raise unrealistic expectations amongst vestries and other church bodies.

What about the five thousand who were fed with five loaves and two fish? Now I can cook, but I've never experienced such a miracle coming out of my kitchen. It's tempting to write off these miracles as things that Jesus did, a long time ago. After all, he is the Son of God. Of course he could do such things! But if we say that, then we've missed something very basic to the nature of miracles and the way God works.

Of all the miracles Jesus performed, the feeding of five thousand is the only one recorded in all four gospels. This story was very important to the first Christians as they tried to understand their faith and their role in this ministry. The disciples went to Jesus with a problem: How to feed so many people with next to nothing. Instead of sending the crowd away, or doing something 'biblical' like raining down manna from heaven, Jesus tells the disciples, "you give them something to eat." They were dumbfounded, and started making excuses. What we see here is the beginning of the biggest obstacle that handicaps God's work in the world to this day -- spiritual paralysis. We hear it now in responses like,

"Oh, I can't do that. Someone else will take care of it, they always do." "We've never done it that way before."

"What difference will my puny little effort make?"

And Jesus says, "You give them something to eat."

The disciples had just returned from a ministry tour of healing the sick and casting out demons, apparently with great ease. Now that they are back with Jesus, who inspired and empowered them in the first place, they wilt and determine that they can do nothing. Why should feeding a crowd be such a big deal? It's as though they checked their hearts and souls and minds at the door, and looked to Jesus to fix it. Well, Jesus is not going to fix this problem. That's not how miracles work; and that may be why we don't put much stock in them, anymore.

We've been conditioned to think of miracles as something like a magic act: big, theatrical displays conducted for the amazement of the audience. What the scriptures describe as miracles are, first and foremost, God's loving response to the real needs of those who seek God. One element seen in every miraculous event in the Bible is someone who allows themselves to become an instrument of God's power to change lives. That could be something as dramatic as healing an illness, calming a storm, or feeding a multitude. And it could be as private and inward as bringing peace to a soul that has never experienced it. Miracles take place when we put our trust in God to supply our needs. Discouragement and disappointment come when what we want, and how we want to receive it, become more important to us than what we need.

God works with what we put into God's hands. Miracles happen when we take part in them. Five loaves and two fish offered in faith, somehow, were enough. The story is told again and again of people bringing things to Christ that he transforms into something new and wonderful. A Roman coin becomes more than just a way to pay taxes, it becomes a symbol of our relationship to the things of heaven and the things of earth. Children blessed by Jesus become valuable in a world where life is cheap and disposable. A cross that was an instrument of death and a symbol of shame, becomes life and love to a lost world. A wild idea to open our doors and serve breakfast to our neighbors becomes a ministry that has touched thousands and thousands

of lives over the past 36 years. These are just some of the miracles that occur when we put what we have into God's hands. These things don't happen in a vacuum, nor are they the by-products of a divine magic act. They are part of an everyday embrace of life lived in Christ.

Even if no one had handed over their lunch box, those people at the seashore probably would have had a meal that day, but then it wouldn't have been a miracle. We can get by in this world without giving ourselves over to God, but a few daily miracles make it a whole lot easier, and spare us a lot of disappointment. Jesus told his disciples to take what they had and give the people something to eat. He asked them to perform a miracle, and with God's help, they did. If that weren't possible, he never would have asked them to do it. A lunch for one became more than enough for five thousand.

What we offer God, is what God gives back to us to satisfy our deepest needs. It's not a question of how much we give, but that if we give anything, at all.