

A Quiet Miracle

John 6.1-15

July 26, 2009

Jesus is God's manna in the wilderness, the one who reminds us day by day that we live because God provides not what we want, necessarily, but exactly what we need: some bread, some love, some breath, some wine, a relationship with this ordinary looking man, who comes from heaven to bring life to the world.

- Barbara Brown Taylor

A Long History

You've probably heard the story of the young farmer who decided to buy a mule to help work his fields. He sought out the best mule breeder in the region and drove to his farm. When he arrived he saw the breeder training a young mule; and what he saw was amazing! The breeder whispered commands and the mule responded immediately. Time and again the mule responded this way, and the young farmer was convinced. He bought a mule, took it home, and immediately harnessed it to a plow. In the field He whispered a command; and the mule just stood there. Time and again he whispered, spoke, or finally shouted commands; but try as he may, he couldn't get that mule to move. Livid, he took the mule back and confronted the breeder. "You lied to me!" he began, "This mule is useless." "Did you use the proper commands?" the breeder asked, surprised. "Yes; but It won't respond to any command; whispered, spoken, or yelled at the top of my lungs!" The old breeder thought for a moment, then responded quietly, "I know your problem." Then he walked over, picked up a two-by-four, and whacked the mule upside its head. "First," he said, "You have to get its attention!"

Be advised that no mules died in the telling of this story, and that I neither condone nor recommend being cruel to any animal at any time. But this story illustrates a significant point; it's hard to get someone's attention, mule or otherwise. In fact, God has spent a significant amount of time over the years trying to attract our attention. Let me share one example with you; an example from today's gospel reading, John 6.1-15:

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ²A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷Philip answered him, 'Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for

each of them to get a little.’⁸ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him,⁹ ‘There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?’¹⁰ Jesus said, ‘Make the people sit down.’ Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all.¹¹ Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.¹² When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, ‘Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.’¹³ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.’¹⁵ When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

It may not seem obvious to you, but I am convinced that this story is all about God trying to get our attention. That’s all; just get our attention. In fact, God has a long history of such efforts. Thank goodness God doesn’t use two-by-fours, but God has a long history of trying to get our attention. Take Moses, for example. He went round and round with God until God took the extraordinary step of speaking to him from a Burning Bush. Now, that got his attention! Or, take Abraham, who actually had his son lashed to a makeshift altar with a knife raised high and poised to strike, when God said, “Whoa... stop right there.” Now, that got his attention! Take Noah... take Jonah! Again and again, God took extraordinary measures to get their attention.

The Nourishment We Need

It seems that God spends an awful lot of time trying to get our attention. And most of the time we respond like the crowd following Jesus in today’s reading. They got all stirred up, that’s for sure. They got all stirred up when Jesus worked his wonders among them; multiplying loaves and fish and feeding them till they were stuffed to the gills. They got all stirred up when this divine carnival barker worked his magic in their midst. Come one, come all! Oh, they were impressed! They were awe-filled and fish-filled, and as it turns out the fish-filled was more important to them. When they came back the next day looking for Jesus, he just shook his head. He knew why they were looking for him again. It wasn’t because his actions the day before had opened their eyes to a new spiritual reality. No. It was because he had provided a feast, and they were hungry again. A feast, I might add, with no small entertainment value.

Interestingly enough, Jesus seemed to be unimpressed with the miraculous aspect of their first encounter. It was all a stage prop, designed to call their attention to something else. Jesus called this something else a sign. This, he said, was what should have captured their imagination. Okay, a sign; but a sign of what? Just what could be more meaningful than multiplying a few loaves and fish into a feast for thousands?

To unravel this little puzzle, this misunderstanding, it helps to recognize that in the Gospel of John, the word miracle is never used for any of Jesus' wondrous works. These works are not significant because they are wondrous; rather, they are significant because they are semeia, Greek for signs. This means they are significant because they point out something about Jesus. They attract our attention, all right; but the "wondrous works" are not important in and for themselves; rather, they are significant because they tell us just who this Jesus is and what he is like. They are teachable moments if you will; showing Jesus as the giver of light and life or, as in this instance, the provider of all we need.

So, what is the sign we should recognize in this encounter? It seems strange that something could be more highly treasured than the wonder of multiplying five barley loaves and two fish into enough food to feed five thousand people and to spare. But Jesus seemed to think that there was another event even more awe-filled and wonder-full than the multiplying of loaves and fish. It would have to be special to be more significant than that, wouldn't it? In light of the many wondrous deeds performed by Jesus in John's gospel, this sign would have to be something! Think about it, Jesus not only turned water into wine, he walked on water as well, he gave sight to the blind... wow! It would have to be some kind of special event, this sign; but Jesus maintained that it was all this and more.

It would seem that Jesus was trying to draw our attention to a quiet miracle. Forget the excitement, the divine fireworks, the heavenly multiplication of food beyond belief. This was all well and good, but Jesus knew that it wouldn't fill anyone the way they needed to be filled. Despite the excitement, it was only food. And those who feasted on this food would hunger again. This, in fact, is why the crowd sought Jesus the next day; because they were hungry. Instead of salivating over more loaves and fish, Jesus suggested, they should have recognized the quiet miracle in all this; they should have read the sign, and understood that Jesus was – and is – the nourishment they needed.

It would seem that Jesus was trying to draw our attention to a quiet miracle. If we will simply look beyond – look through – the act of feeding the multitudes, we will see that in Jesus God offers us the bread that will nourish our spirits, the true bread that will endure. This miracle may be quiet, but it is there day after day, year after year. God didn't give the crowd what they lusted for – food, food, and more food; excitement and divine entertainment – but he offered them what they needed more than all else; living bread, true bread from heaven. And God doesn't give us what we want necessarily; but God offers us what we need more than all else.

Barbara Brown Taylor, whose quote graces our bulletin this morning, suggests that this miracle doesn't need the fireworks, the excitement, or the carnival atmosphere. This gift – the true bread from heaven – is miraculous not because of how it is given, but because of where – or whom – it comes from; God. Jesus was – and is – the gift to whom the sign pointed; Jesus

was – and is – God’s quiet miracle that will provide the nourishment we need; God’s quiet miracle that will endure, because in this man Jesus, we meet God.

God’s quiet miracle that will provide the nourishment we need; if this statement reminds you of gathering about the communion table, this is as it should be, for this story is all about communion. In fact, this story introduces the idea of communion – the Lord’s Supper - in John’s gospel. Jesus doesn’t institute communion during the Last Supper with his disciples just before his arrest. John doesn’t want us to think of one event at the end of Jesus’ life when we gather about the table; rather, he wants us to remember his entire life and teachings: all of the wonderful things he did, all of the compassionate things he did, all of the remarkable teachings that he shared with us. It’s all our motivation, it all instructs us to gather about the Lord’s Table for the nourishment we need.

God’s quiet miracle that will endure; if this statement reminds you of the manna in the wilderness that God provided the ancient Hebrews, this is as it should be, for Jesus is God’s manna... and more. The manna celebrated in the Jewish Exodus was nothing if not short lived. Read the story in Exodus 16. They were instructed to gather it each morning, no more than what they needed for that day; beyond that it would spoil. Manna had a short shelf life; manna had an early expiration date. Quite the contrary, Jesus is enduring nourishment. Just as there was food and to spare when Jesus fed the five thousand, Jesus is the bread from heaven that endures. There is always more; there is always plenty and to spare. It may be a quiet miracle, but it is a real miracle. It is, in fact, the only miracle we need to recognize this day; the true bread from heaven that will nurture and nourish our spirits today, tomorrow, and all the tomorrows that we are given.

The crowd in John’s story sought Jesus again in quest of excitement and, of course, another short lived feast. But Jesus gave them no more excitement, no more wonders; instead, he gave them himself, God’s quiet miracle sent to us with life and light; sent to us as true bread to share with all his disciples, including you and me. Amen.