



July 30, 2006

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Sue Verboom

John 6:1-15

“Making Miracles Possible”

A mother of a junior high school youth leaned over to speak to another parent at a performance of the school’s band and chorus. “I’ve tried everything I can think of,” she said. “NOTHING has ANY effect WHATSOEVER. It would take a MIRACLE to get him to keep his room clean!”

“It was a MIRACLE!” exclaimed the mother of the young bride. “Finding the bridesmaid dresses in pale lilac; as well as co-ordinating the colors with the florist, the bakery and so on—I never thought it would all come together the way it did- what a MIRACLE!”

A teacher of high school math vented his frustration to a colleague: “I just can’t handle that Wilburn kid. He’s constantly disrupting the class, won’t complete his assignments—actually, he’s even physically violent at times: picking fights. I send him to the dean, but I don’t think that’s accomplishing any positive long-term changes. We need a MIRACLE to help that boy and get him straightened out, headed down the right road.”

A farmer walked through his parched field. The sun beat down mercilessly on his head and face, only partially shaded by the hat he wore. He could feel the dryness in every pore of his skin. Looking up to the sky, he breathed softly, “Lord, we need a miracle. Please let it rain.”

A young couple sat anxiously by the bedside of their hospitalized critically injured seven-year-old. Leaving the room for a drink of water, the father met his own dad entering the hospital. His eyes filling, his throat tight, he grasped his father by the shoulders. “Dad,” he choked, “the school bus exploded. The doctors say it will take a MIRACLE to save her.”

The Israeli soldier shifted uncomfortably on the seat of the truck as he returned home from his patrol. He was haunted by the jeers and taunts of the Arab children. Their

faces were so young, so fresh, and so angry. One boy couldn't have been older than eight or nine- the age of his sister's boy. A longing for rest, for peace, for an end to hostility and anguish rushed through him. "God," he prayed, "you must help us. Bring us a MIRACLE."

Miracles. What are miracles? As you probably realized before the sharing of these examples, we use the word in very different kinds of situations. Some are actually trivial, others are profound. Each time I look at a newspaper, viewing stories and photos of the world's strife and anguish, I am filled with longing for God to bring the miracles of peace and justice to his hurting children around the world. Miracles. We ache for them. What does our faith teach about miracles?

Today's Bible reading, from John's sixth chapter, presents one of the many miracles in Scripture. It tells us of Jesus feeding the multitudes with five loaves and two fish. Often, when we discuss and explore the miracle stories we get bogged down in this question: are miracles real? Is there any such thing as a miracle?

Such conversation usually reveals two basic views about miracles:

Miracles are things that happen that are contrary to nature; they are "supernatural" in some way—they are impossible for us to explain.

OR:

Miracles are those incredible aspects of God's creation all around us: the colorful blossom of a flower, the immensity of the Rocky Mountains, the intricacy of a spider's web, or the grasp of the tiny fingers of a newborn baby.

Some folks say they can accept miracles in nature, but not contrary to nature. Some folks say those things that are in nature aren't really miracles per se. Some folks see all of the above as miracles, and all possible. I am in this last group.

For me, actually, miracles that I can't explain, that are beyond the natural order, really aren't that different from the natural miracles all around us. I can't explain those either. I can't explain how a spider knows to make its web, or why the beauty of it, glinting in the sunlight in the garden, brings tears to my eyes. I can't explain it. It's miracle. All miracle.

So, what can we make of all this? Barbara Lundblad, writing in "The Christian Century" magazine on our gospel text, remembers an interpretation of the miracle of feeding the multitudes. Some have suggested that many people saw how the little boy was willing to share his own lunch, giving it to Jesus when asked, and they were moved to open up their own parcels and baskets. Sharing what they had with those around them, soon everyone had something to eat. Ms. Lundblad also remembers a

youth conference when something similar was enacted: one medium sized donut was passed around, among 500 people. “And it came to pass that every person there got a nibble, a crumb of that donut, because no one was selfish (and all were curious).”

I thought about bringing a donut and passing it among us here. I figure everyone would have gotten a bit, no problem. So. Would we have witnessed a miracle here, if I had? I wouldn't want to say “no” to that question, for who's to say what God might do in someone's heart as a result of our little experiment. But I doubt sharing that donut would convey the same message as Jesus feeding the multitudes.

What then, announces: **THIS** is a **MIRACLE**? What makes a **MIRACLE** possible?

The Bible shows us two things: Two things are behind miracles.
FIRST: GOD.

God's power, love and extravagance. Miracles are beyond our own abilities and powers. I cannot make a spider web. I can't make a spider. I can't build a mountain range like the Rockies. **GOD** brings the miracles. **HIS** power makes them possible.

The miracles of nature **AND** the miracles beyond nature described in Scripture attest to God's extravagance. In Jesus' feeding of the multitudes, people didn't get just a little crumb. No morsels or bits were shared. Jesus took the loaves and the fish, thanked God for them, and then passed out food to the people. “No need to take small bites. No prohibition on coming back for seconds,” as Ms. Lundblad remarks in her article. There was food left over. Still more. Jesus had the disciples gather up all that was left, and it filled- **FILLED!** Twelve baskets! Jesus didn't want anything to be lost. There was still so much left, maybe it could feed those who'd arrive a little later.

Christian commentator Fred Craddock remarks on this same point. Jesus did more than what was expected, again and again. His mother Mary wanted him to provide more wine for some wedding guests—and he changed water into wine—of excellent quality! More than what she asked or expected. Jesus' friends, Mary and Martha of Bethany, wanted him to help them in some way during the anguish of losing their brother, and Jesus not only raised Lazarus to new life, he offered resurrection and life to all the world.

So- what does the Bible teach about miracles? God's power makes them possible, and they are abounding and overflowing with love and grace. God gives, and doesn't ask us to understand. God says, “Here—just take it; it's for you. Drink, and rejoice. Eat, and be filled—here, there's more, and still more! Don't be shy. I bring you life, and life abundant.”

But there is a **SECOND** truth the Bible teaches about miracles, and what makes them possible. God's power is behind them, God's love and extravagance, no question. But

WE seem to play a part too. Our “little bits” are given to God, who takes them and makes them great. We give what we have, and our small pieces of this and that are made into miracles. A little kid’s lunch, in God’s hands feeds multitudes. A little question from a mother, “Can you help out here at this wedding, Jesus?” And gallons and gallons of wine overflow in six stone jars. A few words of pain are shared, “Oh, Jesus, if only you’d been here, our brother wouldn’t have died.” And Lazarus comes out of the tomb, trailing his burial clothes behind him.

Our youth made a mission trip to Appalachia last month. They gave what they have to God, their minds, their willing hands and their caring and love. Those may seem to each of them, like “not much”, but we know that God takes our “little bits” and works in them and through them. What our folks GAVE also provided them an opportunity to RECEIVE. Mission trips always bring US just as much if not more than what we offer to others- and that is a miracle.

Twenty-plus adults have attended the first two sessions of the Tears of the World event this summer. They read the memoir of a survivor of the Rwandan Holocaust, and viewed the film *Hotel Rwanda* together in June. Then, this month, they read a compelling and powerful portrait of the tragic harm so many children suffer in urban America: *Amazing Grace* by Jonathan Kozol. We then saw the movie *Crash*, which takes place in L.A. and vividly depicts the ways we mistrust and hurt each other.

The problems we’ve learned about are massive and horribly tragic. We feel small and wonder how we could possibly make a difference. But I am convinced all participants have already begun something vital. They gave their “little bits” of time and attention to learn about and be moved by these situations. And when we give our little bits to God, sometimes miracles happen. I am waiting to see what God will bring to pass out of our first steps of compassion and concern. (It’s not too late to join us for the third session. We are reading the book *Devil’s Highway* by Luis Urrea about tragic deaths that take place on the U.S./Mexican border and seeing the film *El Norte* about a Guatemalan brother and sister who escape violence in their land by fleeing north to the U.S.) If you decide to participate, know that you are giving your time and attention to Christ, just as the boy offered his food to him so long ago.

You see, God works miracles THROUGH and WITH us, as well as FOR us. Consider the examples shared at the beginning of this message. God’s presence and power are behind all miracles. Any sloppy teen who discovers some joy in organization has God with him. God is present at ALL weddings, whether colors co-ordinate or not. God is in the rain that falls on parched earth, God is present in the mending of broken bones of an injured child. God is always acting to bring peace to a war-torn world.

And WE play a part in many such miracles. Some miracles happen when patient parents and teachers keep trying to help a troubled student, praying and asking God’s help. Other miracles happen when doctors and nurses put their skills to work.

Miracles happen when we take seriously God's claim on our lives, our gifts, our possessions.

God wants YOUR little bits. Little bits of this and that. Give them over. Insights, longings, questions, abilities, time, material possessions. Don't worry that they aren't much. Don't worry that God hasn't made clear to you yet what they will be used for. Just give them.

And then STAND BACK. For all the miracle stories we know tell us to WATCH OUT. All the miracles of nature and the stories of Scripture and of our lives and those around us—all the miracles we've known say: God will do MORE than you ever imagined. God's extravagant love will stretch FARTHER than we can see. What you LONG and ACHE for will be supplied, MORE than enough. It will be a miracle, by God's grace, and by our willingness to be God's instruments.

Come, Lord Jesus, we are here.

We give ourselves to you, that your wonders and miracles might never cease.

AMEN. AMEN.

(Invite congregation to write in their bulletins what they might give to the God of miracles today.)