

The Fundamentals: Miracles
A Sermon for University Congregational Church
Sunday, July 21, 2019
Rev. Paul Ellis Jackson

Traditional Word:

35 When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; 36 send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." 37 But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii[a] worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" 38 And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." 39 Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. 40 So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. 41 Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. 42 And all ate and were filled; 43 and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. 44 Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

–Mark 6:35-44 NRSV

Contemporary Word:

"...it is unimportant whether or not the event actually happened. What matters is that the story points to the most important truth in all creation. Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ. And to follow Jesus means one will never need for food, because the follower of Jesus will be fed, both physically and spiritually, now and forever. Since love was at the center of the life and ministry of Jesus, we should always remember that love is the one thing we can give away endlessly—and find ourselves with more than when we started." –Rev. Dr. Gary Cox, *Think Again: A Response to Fundamentalism's Claim on Christianity*

The Fundamentals: Miracles

It's dangerous to use Google when researching a sermon on miracles. I wound up traveling down so many twisting rabbit-holes that I often had to leave my desk and

wander about the church grounds to clear my head. People have some passionate views on the miraculous—and some of them are very persuasive in their rhetoric. I want to believe in miracles. I really do! But my scientific brain always kicks in and mocks me for even trying...I think miracles and the miraculous are a matter of perspective. What might be obviously a natural phenomenon in one person's eyes, can be a miracle in another's. Perspective and context can help us all understand what each other is experiencing—whether that is a fact of science in one's opinion, or a miracle in another's depends on where you are standing. The problem with miracles, for me, is when we start believing in them at the cost of judgment—judging other people who don't hold to the same beliefs that we do.

When someone mysteriously, against all odds, survives a fatal diagnosis—that is indeed miraculous! But did the Divine One intercede? And if so, why did God intervene in one case and in not another? Aren't we all worthy of miracles? This is the problem with miracles for me—why do some people get them and others don't? Why does God allow miracles to occur for some, but not for all?

In all of the stories I read this past week, something happened. Something that defies belief. Something unexplainable. And isn't that the very basis of faith? Our faith is difficult to define because it IS belief. And these stories are indeed miraculous! Many people in this room have experienced things in their lives that can only be described as miraculous. Miracles do happen—I think they are a way for humans to explain the unexplainable. Sometimes science falls short in explaining natural phenomena and, for me, this is where God lurks. In those spaces, those gaps, of our

knowledge. Instead of writing it off as a capricious act of nature, we attribute it to a Divine Presence. And I like that. This is where I find God.

Today we're looking at the Fundamental belief in miracles—specifically the miracles of Jesus of Nazareth. Both the Bible and the Koran list numerous miracles attributed to Jesus: Changing water into wine, healing the leper and raising Lazarus from the dead, and there are numerous miracles recounted in the non-canonical literature—those writings that did not make it into the bible. And it's important to note what Jesus himself said in the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, regarding himself and these supernatural events: after he heals the leper in Mark 40 he tells the man to tell no one of what he had done. In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus doesn't want people to think of him as a miracle-worker, but rather as the Son of God.

Now Miracles had been around a long time before Jesus appeared on the scene: Gods and demigods such as Hercules, Asclepius (a Greek physician who became a god) and Isis of Egypt all were thought to have healed the sick and overcome death by raising people from the dead. Some thought that mortal men, if sufficiently famous and virtuous, could do likewise; there were myths about philosophers like Pythagoras, calming storms at sea, chasing away pestilences, and being greeted as a god, and similarly, some Jews believed that Elisha the Prophet had cured lepers and restored the dead.

Belief in miracles has long been a requirement for admission into the Christian church. In 1910 the Presbyterian Church created a test for belief in authenticity of

the miracles in the bible as part of your profession of faith—that is, early in the last century, to be a member of the Presbyterian Church USA (and most churches had and have these requirements), you had to say that you believed that the miracles as told in the bible, were historical and accurate events. And even today, as I mentioned in my opening paragraph, there are wonderful, convincing rhetorical arguments for belief in miracles. And as I said, many of you in the room have experienced something “miraculous”—something that cannot be explained. But are we, as a body of Christ, required to believe that the stories of miracles in the Bible are true, accurate and historical? Can we be considered Christian even if we don’t believe these things? Well, of course we can—being a Christian doesn’t mean checking off the boxes on a list of beliefs—it’s much more important than that.

Let’s look at a famous example of a Jesus miracle from the Bible: The Loaves and the Fishes. The story takes place while Jesus is finishing up a sermon where a multitude had gathered to hear him preach outside of town on a deserted hilltop. I put the scripture in your bulletins—it’s from Mark’s Gospel: Hear the story now in all of its miraculous nature: “35 When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; 36 send them [the congregation] away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.” 37 But he [Jesus] answered them, “You give them something to eat.” They said to him, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii[a] worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?” 38 And he [Jesus] said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.” When they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” 39 Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the

green grass. 40 So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. 41 Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. 42 And all ate and were filled; 43 and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. 44 Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.”

In his book, *Think Again: a Response to Fundamentalism’s Claim on Christianity*, our second Senior Minister, Gary Cox, writes: “This simple and straightforward story has caused no shortage of arguments among Bible scholars, who tend to fall into one of four categories regarding the multiplication of the loaves. The first explanation for the story is that it happened EXACTLY as written. This story reveals a miraculous event that actually happened in the life of Jesus. It is not conservative or fundamentalist people alone who believe this. Many open-minded and serious scholars do not think we should try to explain away the miracle stories.”

Gary goes on to tell us though about how Albert Schweitzer, that brilliant polymath, saw this story of the loaves and the fishes, as a simple sacramental meal, similar to Holy communion, that over time gained the mythic properties of a miracle. And then there is the “rationalist explanation” that holds that the listeners’ knapsacks and pockets were filled with more than enough food to feed those present and that they were shamed by Jesus’ words and his faith and they simply produced the food and shared it with their neighbors. Not a miracle at all—just human beings sharing what they already had in abundance.

A final explanation that Rev. Dr. Cox elaborates is the one called the “symbolic explanation”: Why did the authors of the Gospel accounts write their stories? All four of those writers were evangelists. The intentions of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were to reflect on the life of Jesus in a way that would convince the readers and hearers of their gospel stories that Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified prophet from Galilee, is the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the redeemer of Israel.”

Many of you have told me stories of miracles in your own lives: Healing miracles, wisdom miracles, miracles about finances and special assistance. Occurrences in your lives that defy any ordinary explanation. As I said in my opening, I spent many hours combing my books and Google for the perfect “miracle” story to use as an illustration for today’s sermon and I found too many to use! But the common thread running through all of them was this: Something happened—we can’t explain it—so it must be a “God Thing”. Or maybe it’s a God plus human-thing—God working through us. Miracles are all around us if we but change our point of view

In the past few years, this community of friends, UCC, has worked with Gammon Elementary school on a variety of projects. Our relationship with this dynamic school began small, with us assisting the teachers with a supply closet—we raised some money so that the teachers didn’t have to use their personal funds to access the materials they need to teach the required curricula. We’ve attended Halloween and music events, we’ve given our expertise as tutors and mentors. University Congregational Church is an active presence in the life of this school and the lives of

her students. But one story among the many stands out as somewhat miraculous. Through careful attention to what was happening around her, one of our Gammon volunteers became close to one student at Gammon in particular and decided to learn more about this family.

Seven human beings, just like you and me, fled the brutal violence and oppressive civil war in the Congo and somehow managed to get to neighboring Tanzania, where they lived in a refugee camp for seven years. The only education available to the family during this time was a type of mission “summer school”. None of the family spoke any English. In December of 2016, through some miraculous act, this family of seven human beings, just like you and me, were admitted to the United States of America and they were allowed to choose Wichita for temporary residency because they had some family members here already.

In the fall of 2017, Marla Flentje (to whom I am greatly indebted, not only for the details of this story but also for the inspiration it sparked in me for this sermon)-- Marla met Roza, the youngest member of this family. Roza was in kindergarten and Marla was assigned to be her volunteer tutor—a tutoring relationship that lasted for the next 2 years. Due to the effective learning available to all of the children through an ESOL (English as a Second Language) program, they are all succeeding in school. Roza is reading at her appropriate, second-grade level; Asta, who will be in the ninth grade at East High this coming year, qualified for the WSU Trio program, a federal program that targets bright middle schoolers who come from disadvantaged backgrounds with opportunities for academic development and college preparation.

(Asta's previous teacher at Curtis recommended her to the program). Every child in this family will tell you that they want to go to college (there's a future endeavor for this community right there!). Son Sanbueete says he wants to be an engineer who designs airplanes! Wichita's the right community to pursue that dream in, no?

In the fall of 2017, Gammon staff recommended this family as one of UCC's Gammon Angel Tree families. Several of us met the family when we delivered presents to their cramped, but well-maintained apartment. During this time we got to know Seline and Jeanvier, two very hard working and resourceful parents. Dad works at the meatpacking plant in Arkansas City; mom works full-time as a housekeeper in a nursing home facility. The family attends a Baptist church that provides space for other Congolese refugees to worship and have fellowship—these worship services are provided in their native Swahili language, itself a small miracle!

Just last winter, we learned from a Gammon teacher that this family of human beings, just like you and me, had qualified for one of the Air Capital Build Habitat houses—a home of their own. The qualification requirements for a Habitat house are very difficult to meet—you have to be very determined to qualify – in addition to sufficient income standards the requirements include 400 hours of sweat equity (some of which must be spent working on a neighbor's home), and 40 hours of classes in household budgeting and home maintenance.

University Congregational Church has stepped up to help this family in additional ways: Outreach presented the family with a Target gift card as a house-warming gift when they recently moved into their new Habitat for Humanity Home; A 12-member

UCC crew worked along Seline and her daughters to do the final cleanup on their new home right before moving day; Several of us and also Gammon teachers attended the official Habitat ceremony celebrating the completion of not only their home but two others as well. UCC members generously opened their basements and attics to contribute additional needed items for the five-bedroom home: coffee table and end tables, bedside tables, lamps, household tools, vacuum cleaner, games for the children, and a laptop computer.

University Congregational Church, human beings, just like Seline, Jeanvier and their children, were all part of this miracle—along with numerous other community partners. But this brings me to my point: What if we are the miracle? What if we are meant to co-create with God a world where miracles like Seline’s family happen all of the time? What if we are supposed to open our eyes to this suffering world and put ourselves where the miracle needs to be? What if all we need to do is change our perspective and our attitude? What if this idea of the Christ, of the Savior, is actually what happens when we start loving our neighbors? What if the miracle is love? And if the miracle is love then that is the one thing that we have in abundance and can share freely with the world.

Gary Cox, this church’s second Senior Minister, says this about Jesus and his miracles: “...it is unimportant whether or not the event actually happened [the feeding of the multitude]. What matters is that the story points to the most important truth in all creation. Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ. And to follow Jesus means one will never need for food, because the follower of Jesus will be fed, both physically

and spiritually, now and forever. Since love was at the center of the life and ministry of Jesus, we should always remember that love is the one thing we can give away endlessly—and find ourselves with more than when we started.” What would our lives look like if we indeed looked for miracles everywhere? What if the new fundamental belief is one of us working with God—co-creating a miraculous world of plenty?

I’m grateful for this congregation that goes out into the world, every day, and tries to be a miracle. I’m grateful for each of you and the myriad ways you are helping me see God’s hand at work in everything we do. I think you, this church, might be a miracle. And that’s such a good thing. Amen.

RESOURCES

Rev. Dr. Gary Cox, *Think Again: A Response to Fundamentalism’s Claim on Christianity*