

Journey into Being the Church: Bringing our Two Fish and our Five Loaves

It must have been overwhelming, sitting there on the grass with Jesus and watching hoards of people appear, only to hear Jesus turn toward you and say, “Where do you think we could buy bread to feed these people?” Phillip’s mind jumps to estimating the cost of bread for a crowd this size. No doubt, the question seems completely unreasonable. He doesn’t see that behind the question is a test, or perhaps even, a joke that Jesus is playing on him. Jesus had a plan, but it seems he was curious to see just what Philip was capable of imagining in this scenario. He’s interested to see what Philip has learned and observed after following him for some time.

Philip, has been on a journey with Jesus and has seen many remarkable things, but he is still rooted in a material world consisting of things you can measure, things you can buy, things you can realistically rely upon. But Jesus is continually revealing the spiritual as it is woven into the material, upending expectations, and uncovering abundance in the midst of apparent lack. In the hands of Christ, what is measured proves in the end to exceed what the measurement promised. The material world cannot define what is possible, and so, we are asked to remain open to what seems impossible.

This leads us to the issue of miracles. Christians exist all along a spectrum regarding what they believe about miracles. On one end of the spectrum is a disregard for science altogether and an insistence that we wait on God to do something. Here’s where we see people refusing to take a loved one to the doctor because healing work is God’s work, and it is our work to always expect a miracle – when miracles don’t happen usually someone’s lack of faith is blamed.

On the other end of the spectrum are Christians who think miracles are a thing of the past, if they even happened in the past, and that it is our work to put our trust solely in what is logical and verifiable. Longing for miracles will only lead to disappointment and looking to God is to shirk our own responsibility. Change is up to us alone.

Neither orientation is a healthy one for the Church as it seeks to follow Jesus. In our journey with Jesus, the Church is repeatedly asked in some form or another, “Where are you going to buy bread to feed all these people?” In today’s

language it might look like, “How are you going to meaningfully address the deep psychological toll taken on the people of this nation by COVID, racial inequities, and political turmoil?” The question, when it is received, feels overwhelming. Certainly, it is overwhelming if we think we are dependent upon only our own understanding and our own skills and resources. What can we possibly do in the face of problems that were several centuries in the making? An overreliance on miracles might keep us from doing anything because we bank on God swooping in with a dramatic act of power. A disbelief in the miraculous might cause us to over-rely on existing political structures or to do nothing because we look at what is within our own hands and it feels insignificant.

In the gospel Philip calculates the cost of bread. Andrew looks at what is at hand and laments the limits of what two fish and five barley loaves amount to in the face of so many people and so great a need.

This current moment in which the Church finds herself is not unlike a scrappy group of disciples gathered with Jesus on a hill when, everywhere they look there are swarms of people full of hunger and need and political frustration. And much of that same hunger, need, and frustration exist within the bodies and souls of the disciples themselves. So it is with us.

And yet...

Even as Jesus raises the question, Jesus has something in mind. He had something in mind with the disciples, and he has something in mind for the Church. As overwhelming as the question, “Where will we...?” or “How will we...?” initially lands, there is something we can do. We can look for the two fish and the five barley loaves in our midst and raise our own question, “If we offer this, how might God multiply it in service of the need that surrounds us and exists within us?”

Over and over again, as the Church and as individuals, we are invited to bring forward our seemingly paltry two fish as an offering to God and to the world. We take in hand the five barley loaves that don’t seem all that inspiring and we get curious about what God might be able to do with that. We inhabit the middle space between doing nothing and trying to engineer everything, trusting

that God has sufficient power and commitment to honor what we have been called to do and to be in the world.

The Church cannot just sit on a hill with Jesus in its own private picnic and ignore the hunger, need and frustration that exists without and within. Nor can the Church adopt a political party, Republican or Democrat, and seek safety through political power. We are called to do the unthinkable, to look at the fish and the loaves in our hands and to consider them enough as we step forward into the pool of need.

This gospel includes a second miracle story. The disciples are in a boat, trying to cross the lake, and encounter a rough and windy storm. They look out and see someone walking toward them on the water. It is Jesus and he tells them not to be afraid. Suddenly their boat arrives at the destination.

A group of men set out in a wooden boat, with just some oars and a sail and no sooner does their journey get started, than a sudden tumult threatens their ability to arrive at their destination. But they do arrive, and it would seem, that the boat gets there in spite of their fear and their distraction and it gets there just at the moment when they invite Jesus into their boat.

It's a powerful metaphor and its more than a metaphor. Inviting Jesus into our boat is more than an intellectual assent to his reality, or a request that he bless our aspirations. Inviting Jesus into our boat involves realizing that there are storms that feel like too much for us, but that they can be weathered when we acknowledge our limits and truly, honestly partner with Jesus.

And so in this gospel we have two miracles. We have a miracle that invites us to acknowledge God's power to exponentially increase the impact of the fish and the loaves in our hands. And we have a miracle where we are asked to set off on a journey, and in the midst of threatening circumstances, to allow God more than a symbolic function in our lives.

What are your own miracle stories? Where has God taken a seemingly insignificant offering of time, talent or money and then accomplished something beautiful and holy, something beyond what you could imagine? Where has God joined you in some personal tumult and brought you to the other side?

Let's not ignore God's power and promise to partner with us. In our journey with Jesus, let us be part of a Church that invites God to join us as we step forward with our two fish and our five loaves to meet the overwhelming hunger of our age. In our journey with Jesus, let us be part of a Church that sails into storms, holding our own fear lightly and trusting Jesus with our destination. Sometimes in the midst of the storms we don't realize that we are so nearly at the shore; it takes a relationship with Jesus to help us see that.

The material world alone cannot define what is possible, and so, we are asked to remain open to what seems impossible. With that in mind, I pray for us, the prayer Paul had for the Ephesians:

"I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."