

G.O.A.T.: Jesus, the Greatest Miracle Worker
John 6:1-14
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Sometimes we need of a miracle. And sometimes we are the miracle that someone else needs. Author and former pastor, Rob Bell describes a woman who attended the church where he once pastored. Each week after worship, she would walk up and give Rob a piece of paper. She'd smile, and they'd chat for a moment or two, and then she'd walk away. The piece of paper was folded, and as he opened the paper there was a number on it. Sometimes the number was big, like 174. Sometimes it was smaller. Once it was 2. The number indicated how many days it had been since she last cut herself. If you don't know about cutting, there are people in this world who are in so much pain that the act of cutting themselves actually makes them feel better – but for not long, the relief doesn't last. Some people need of a miracle. This woman who attended Rob's church had struggled with this addiction for years. For much of her life she was beaten – literally beaten by the men who claimed to love her and beaten down by the world around her – circumstances beyond her control, until a group of people – church people, Christian people – came alongside her to help her find healing and hope. Eventually, the number on the piece of paper was 365, one entire year without cutting. Sometimes we are the miracle that someone else needs.

So, what constitutes a miracle? In his book, "Seven Convincing Miracles" in which he explores the seven miracles in the gospel of John, pastor and author, Erwin Lutzer says, "A popular but wrong definition of a miracle is to say that a miracle is a point in time in which God intervenes in the world. That definition fails for one good reason. It gives the impression that God only occasionally intervenes in the world... A miracle happens when God, who is continually active in the world, breaks through the usual pattern and does something extraordinary."

In December of 2011, my father had open heart surgery that went terribly wrong. No one was to blame, it's just the way it went. And for the next two months, my dad was in a coma. And for two months after that, he was in the ICU, and he spent a fifth month in a rehabilitation center. But in May of 2012, he was finally able to go home. Although his mind was strong, his body just continued to get weaker and weaker. Over the next three years, I made as many trips to San Diego as I could to spend time with my mom and dad. I cherish those memories today. In May of 2015, I knew that would be the last time I'd see my dad alive. His kidneys were failing. He was tired and he was ready to go home. So, we said our goodbyes and I returned to Minnesota. Just a few days later, I received a call from my sister letting me know that Dad had been admitted to the hospital, was unconscious and was on a morphine drip to keep him comfortable in his last few days and hours of life. My siblings and my mother were all there with dad. Our son and his wife had also driven down from the Bay area to be there. At first, I was at peace not being there because we had said our last goodbyes. But within an hour or so, I had this overwhelming need to be with my family in my dad's final hours. So, I bought a plane ticket for very early the next morning. That night at 2a, one of the nurses who was caring for my dad, pulled my sister, Lisa, aside and said, "Your dad should have passed hours ago. What do you think he's waiting for?" Lisa told her that I was on my way but that my dad didn't know that. And the nurse replied, "Oh, yes he does." And do you know I arrived at the hospital just after 2p and my dad passed just a few minutes before 3p. That extra time was a miracle that allowed our immediate family to be present when our dad passed from this world to the next.

Many of you already know this. In ways, both explainable and unexplainable, you have experienced God doing something extraordinary in your life. You know a presence and a power

not previously known. It is the work of faith in our lives. Frederick Buechner says that miracles are most likely to come from faith. Usually, a miracle helps someone in need. But the meaning is always deeper; God gets our attention so that we are invited to look beyond the event and instead, to the Miracle Worker. Clearly, if the purpose of Christ's miracles was only to help someone in need, thousands more would have been healed. The primary purpose of miracles was to authentic the message of Jesus and point us to the power of God. And what is that message? John 6:32 tells us: *Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."* And so today, we continue in our message series, *Jesus the Greatest of All Time* as we look today to Jesus, as the greatest miracle worker.

There are at least 35 miracles that Jesus performed recorded in the Bible. Some of these miracles are recorded in one, two or three of the gospels but this story, the feeding of the five thousand, is the only miracle Jesus performed that is recorded in all four Gospels. Its repetition gives it importance. So why is this story told over and over again? I believe it captures the very essence of all involved. It captures the very essence of Jesus as the wondrous son of God. It captures the very essence of God, God's abundant and extravagant generosity and grace. And it captures the very essences of the disciples who often don't get it, even after they had seen it firsthand, God's miraculous work in our lives.

John tells us this occurred during the Jewish festival of Passover and at a time when Jesus' popularity was enormous because he had been healing many people. He was like a rock star when he rolled into town and thousands would gather to hear him preach. But this was also a time of great sadness for Jesus and the people of Israel because Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, had just been be-headed by King Herod. Everyone was stunned by this tragedy including Jesus who had been baptized by John. Jesus wanted to get away to be alone and to grieve. So, he got in a boat and sailed across Lake Galilee, a distance of about four miles, to a remote point.

As a point of reference, Lake Galilee is about three times larger than Lake Minnetonka. If you look at a map, you will see the city of Capernaum on the northwest side of the lake. This is where he set sail from and Bethsaida Julius on the northeast side of the lake. This is where it is believed he came ashore. As he sailed, he most likely followed the shoreline which made it possible for the crowds to see his boat and so they followed. And when Jesus' boat landed, they were there. Thousands of them.

So that sets the scene of what was happening that day. But John's version of this story is different from all the other gospels in that John's is the only account that tells us about the little boy. Let's pause for a moment and try to remember what it feels like to be a child in a large crowd. It's intimidating, loud, overwhelming, and scary. Here's this little boy in the middle of a crowd of Pharisees, Sadducees, big burly fishermen and farmers, rich people, poor people—5,000 men, John tells us. That count doesn't include the women or children so there were probably more like 10,000 people gathered there that day. This little boy is also poor. We know this because John tells us that the loaves were barley loaves. Barley was the grain of the poor because it was the cheapest grain. And the fish were sardines. Two little fish and a few slices of bread. A soggy sardine sandwich. This was the little boy's lunch. When we understand this, we begin to see the power of the miracle.

I couldn't help but wonder why John makes mention of this little boy. Perhaps it is because it shows us that even the most insignificant among us possess the stuff of miracles. Because it was out of what the little boy had that Jesus found the building blocks of a miracle. And Jesus

desires to use whatever we bring also. I often wonder how many miracles are denied because we won't offer what we have to Jesus? We have time. We have skills. We have financial resources. We have expertise. We have so much to offer no matter how insignificant we believe ourselves or our gifts to be. Little is much when God is in it. Let me give you an example.

Five years ago, sisters Emily and Ashley (ages 6 and 3 at the time), wanted to do something to help those right here in our community who didn't have enough food to eat. So, they set up a hot chocolate stand in their driveway and raised enough money to purchase over 60 boxes of cereal for area food shelves. Well, since then, they've continued their cocoa stand, now branded the Cocoa Cafe. Yesterday Jerry and I stopped by to support Emily and Ashley and was delighted to see how many of you were doing the same thing. I'm happy to share with you that yesterday, the Cocoa Cafe raised \$3,451. And with a matching grant, their total is \$6,902 that will go to area food shelves. Two little girls who offered what they had can serve as a reminder to us. When we're tempted to believe we can't make a difference in the world because we're just too insignificant. Or we have nothing to offer because we're not public figures who can draw large crowds, remember, God uses the insignificant, the overlooked, and the little.

Okay, back to our story. When Jesus saw the crowds, he asked Phillip, "Where will we buy food to feed these people?" What Jesus didn't ask was, "Where will we *find the money* to buy food to feed these people?" This was a test for Phillip because Jesus already knew what he was going to do. But Phillip replied, "We don't have enough." And then Andrew pointed out the little boy's lunch and asked, "what good is that for a crowd like this?" They were focused on what they did not have rather than what they did have, which was the Son of God, the miracle worker in their midst. Yet, as Jesus pointed out, "not enough" is never the final answer. Because, when placed in the hands of Jesus, our little bit becomes more than enough!

Sometimes people ask me, "How did he do it? How did Jesus feed all those people with so little food?" Honestly, I have no idea and it's hard to picture in my mind how this miracle happened. We have five loaves of bread and two little fish, and it fed 5,000? As they tore off pieces of the bread, did more and more bread just magically appear? Maybe Jesus worked a transformation of the loaves of bread, so the loaves miraculously continued to multiply, and it was the bread that experienced the transformation. That's the way it reads. But some scholars who read this story wonder if there wasn't some other kind of miracle happening that day. Of those 5,000 men, maybe 10,000 people in all, someone had to have planned ahead and packed a lunch. I mean, with the men came their women. They surely would have planned in advance. Right? Most likely, they had brought baskets of food that they planned to keep for themselves and their families. But when they saw what the little boy did, giving Jesus his lunch, they were inspired to look inside their belongings, at what they had been hiding, and share with others. I have no doubt that there was probably some supernatural miracle happening that day, but I also wonder if there was also a transformation of thousands of selfish hearts. This is a beautiful story about taking what you have, your loaves and fishes, and surrendering them to God to use to help someone else. And if you think you are too small to make a difference, remember this African proverb that says, "If you think you are too small to make a difference, try spending the night in a closed room with a mosquito."

Most of you know of Messiah's long-standing relationship with Habitat for Humanity, but how many of you know of Habitat's meager beginnings? In 1976, when Millard and Linda Fuller started Habitat for Humanity, they had very few resources. But there was a huge need for affordable and decent housing for the working poor. So, with just a couple of tools and a small group of volunteers, it would have been easy and understandable for the Fullers to just shrug their shoulders and say, "How can what we have meet such a large need?" Yet, their faith in

Christ's ability to multiply what they had compelled them forward, and today, Habitat for Humanity is a clear witness, a modern day "feeding of the five thousand" —a reminder of what God can do with our meager resources, if only we are willing to give God what we have. Your little is much when God is in it.

Our temptation, of course, is to think that we really can't make a difference, that we'll never be able to significantly impact on someone else's life. Let me share another story with you. When the war in Ukraine broke out, a pair of brothers from right here in Plymouth saw what was happening and wanted to do something to help. So they decided to raise money for Ukrainian children refugees in Poland by "selling" basketball free throws. In total, 124 kids from around the world have shot over 5,000 free throws and to date have raised over \$32,000. Little is much when God is in it.

When asked what it is that God is looking for, I am reminded of these words from Isaiah. *"Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into your house, covering the naked when you see them, and not hiding from your own family? Then your light will break out like the dawn, and you will be healed quickly. Your own righteousness will walk before you, and the Lord's glory will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and God will say, 'I'm here.'" (Isaiah 58:7-9)* And how is God there for you? I don't know about you, but I have never had God show up as an angel in my life, you know, the winged being with a halo and a glowing aura. I've never heard the audible voice of God but yet I hear God speaking in my heart and mind all of the time. The way that God usually shows up in my life is through other people. So, here's how it works. You give what you have away, sharing with others in need, and what you'll find is blessings returning to you because sometimes we need a miracle and sometimes, we are the miracle that someone else needs.

Let's pray: Lord, at times we're weary, tired, burned out, we've given all we can and we just want to get away. We just need some quiet time alone with you. But especially in those times, help us to pay attention, to listen closely for your call on our lives. To hear your words speak to us that say, "You give them something to eat." Direct our hearts to use the abilities and resources you've given us so that we might bless others. And in the process, find our hearts satisfied as well. Lord, as you fed the multitudes with bread and fish, we pray that you will feed our hearts with the Bread of Life, so that we'll never go hungry again. In Jesus's name, amen.