

July 28 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

One of my favorite verses from the Apostle Paul is, “Now to God who is able to do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine.” That is an incredible affirmation, and it sets the tone for this morning’s gospel message.

Jesus participates in several miracles here. To begin with, His healing of the sick was so impressive that it drew a large crowd, a crowd so large that logistically it was impossible to feed them. He then multiplies the loaves and fishes donated by a young lad and has 12 baskets left over. In this short passage, He then performs two more miracles. He walks on water and then gets into the disciples' storm-tossed boat, which immediately arrives on shore. There are a lot of eye-popping miracles in a very short span of scripture. While Philip was trying to visualize how the people would be fed, Jesus had a little good fun with him by asking how to feed so many, even though Jesus already knew the answer. Philip then says, “There is a lad here with a few loaves and fishes, but what is that among so many?” Philip may have been ribbing Jesus since he knew what Jesus was capable of, for he had been in attendance at the wedding where plenty of wine was flowing. The young boy Philip points out contributes everything he has in a crowd with a shortage of food—that was incredibly courageous. We have no name for him, but he gave his best. And then, as the scripture unfolds, Jesus does the rest. The second section has a similar dynamic. The disciples were seasoned fishermen, and for them to be stuck in a storm was unusual. First, they would know better, and second, they were strong rowers. I am sure they were doing their best. Then Jesus entered the boat and did the rest.

This chapter of John is one of the most significant and controversial in the entire book, most significant because many scholars see it as the peak of John’s narrative prior to the Passion Week. It is most controversial because there are theological debates brewing in every denomination concerning the meaning of Jesus as the bread of life. There are multiple themes here, so I am going to focus on one: the participatory aspect of miracles. When Jesus healed people, He often

asked for their participation. “Take up your bed and walk,” He says to the lame man. “Wash in the Pool of Siloam,” He says to the blind man. And to the woman with the issue of blood who took the initiative and touched Him, He says, “Your faith has made you well.” Later in His ministry, Jesus grants the power to do miracles to the disciples. Jesus does miracles in concert with us, as He did with the young lad who provided the loaves. When He fed the 5,000, He asked people to sit down, pass the food out, and pick up the scraps. With the boat, the disciples were rowing when Jesus (literally) climbed aboard. As Augustine said, “God gives the wind, but man must raise the sail.” Paul stated it this way: “Some sow, others reap, but God gives the harvest.” We are in this together, with each other and with our Lord.

I heard a sermon on this from a military chaplain who demonstrated this participatory aspect of miracles. She said that while in a battle zone in Iraq, convoys were cut off, and the unit was running out of food and water in temperatures well over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. It was dangerous, dusty, and deadly, and no help was on the way. She then addressed the troops. She said, “I know that many of you have care packages from home. I know that you are anxious and are depending on those packages of food, juices, and snacks to get you by in this crisis. I ask this: Will you all bring all that you have here so that we might share?” She said they did, and it was enough. Crisis averted.

I have often spoken of the Bonny Doon Church, which faced the incredible challenge of the CZU fires. For me, the symbolic miracle was the fire stopping right at the foot of the cross on the church steeple. My friend, Terry Portraz, did not think that was a miracle, but she wondered how we fed and cared for the whole community in those early days. The answer was contained in her question when she said, “How did we?” We were able to do that because it was a participatory miracle. God put the wind under our sails, but we raised them up by putting up pop-up shelters like sails around the grounds, leasing outdoor toilets, cooking food, and bringing water in. It took not only the whole team of the Higher Grounds Cafe but the local Bonny Doon community, Twin Lakes Church, the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance people, the Red Cross, and

yes, Trinity Presbyterian Church. Reinhold Niebuhr said, “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we must be saved by love.”

I have seen it over and over with Urban Works, with Somos, Coffee, with the Presbyterian pub. Here at Trinity, how do miracles happen? Is it about us? Is it about others? Is it about God? The answer is yes, yes, and yes. Paul put it this way:

“For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us.” 2 Corinthians 1:20