

**Sunday, July 28, 2024**  
**Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 12B)**

John 6.1-21

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/858127685667870>

*(Sermon begins at about 21:05)*

**“Miracles”**

We just heard one of the most well-known miracle stories in all the Gospels. In fact, as virtually every commentary on this story points out, the feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle Jesus performed that is recorded in all four Gospels, giving this story particular weight in the canon of miracle stories. Particularly when you consider three critical facts about the Gospels. First, that none of the Gospels were written by people who were actual witnesses to the events described (with the possible exception of John, and even that is highly debated). As such, the authors of each of the Gospels relied on accounts conveyed to them by other people—meaning what was written was based on second or third hand accounts at best. Second, the earliest of the Gospels, Mark, was written about 30 to 40 years after Jesus’ death, and John was written something like 60 to 80 years after Jesus’ death. So, the accounts presented were a distant memory for those conveying the stories to the Gospel writers. And third, that each of the Gospels was written to a very particular audience for a very particular purpose. Yet, despite all of this, each of the Gospels contains this common story. Telling us that this particular miracle is incredibly important in demonstrating the ministry of Jesus Christ, and that it has something critical to say about who we are as his followers.

A common question that often arises when dealing with the feeding of the five thousand is, what actually happened? Did Jesus somehow multiply the five barley loaves and two fish into a vast amount, enough to feed all those present, with twelve baskets of leftovers to spare? Or did it turn out that there were others besides the boy who happened to have food with them, and that they all ended up sharing, so that all had as much as they wanted? Two competing explanations that are polar opposites in nature. Although, does it really make a difference? Regardless of what actually happened, there was a miracle. A multitude of people were fed.

Of course, we have no way of knowing for sure what exactly happened. And I am not willing to take a position one way or the other. Because, again, regardless of how it actually happened, a miracle did occur. If it was Jesus miraculously multiplying the bread and fish, we certainly have no way of explaining that. But if it were the case that others had food with them and shared it, that is certainly easier to explain. So, let’s delve a little deeper into that possibility, with an eye toward the deeper meaning of the miracle.

The various accounts we have of the feeding of the five thousand indicate that the miraculous event took place in a fairly remote place along the Sea of Galilee. In John’s account, we are told that “Jesus went up [a] mountain,” and that it was there that the crowds assembled around him, listening to him preach, seeking healing of their infirmities. Given the sheer numbers, they were obviously going to be there quite a while. Jesus becomes concerned about their

wellbeing, that they would most certainly need something to eat. If nothing else, so they would have strength to return to their homes.

They were likely a bit of a distance from the nearest village or town. And even if there were a nearby town, it was highly unlikely that there would be any shops, and certainly no shops along the roads between. Hence, Jesus' question to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" The reality was, there was no such place. And, as Philip responds, "Six month's wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." Even if there were shops nearby, they would certainly not be of sufficient scale to accommodate the needs of five thousand people all at once.

Lacking the conveniences we take for granted, at the time of Jesus, particularly in more remote areas, if people were going to go any distance from home or anticipate being gone for the better part of a day, they would have taken food with them. That was just a necessity of life in those days. This is indicated by the fact that there was a boy present who had five barley loaves and two fish. Bread and dried fish being the common "traveling food," particularly for poorer folks—primarily because it was both cheap and durable. The boy must have overheard Jesus and the disciples talking about their concern for feeding the people. Hearing of the need of so many, he is moved to share his own provisions. A touching gesture. "But what are they among so many people?" As we heard, Jesus has all the people sit down, and then he "took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted." And, voila, all were fed, each having as much to eat as they wanted, with plenty left over.

It is only reasonable to assume that a number of those present had, like the boy, packed provisions for the day. It is likely that some were moved by the boy's generosity and followed suit. First one pulling out a couple of barley loaves and a few dried fish, then another, and so on, adding to the communal fare. Before you know it, everyone—regardless of whether they had had the foresight to pack a meal or not—were eating their fill.

Now, it is possible that some might have been prompted by guilt, out of a sense of shame, particularly that a child would be willing to share what little he had. But I would guess that most of those present were moved by the boy's generosity to share of their own provisions. Inspired by his example. "And a little child shall lead them." After all, we know from experience that generosity is a contagious thing. Generosity begets generosity. Especially when people are in a shared experience like the scene on that mountain. So many people coming together out of a common need—the need to hear the good news of God's love, the need to be healed. The crowd energized by Jesus' words—which may have even contained teachings on generosity, as he often did. The crowd joyous over the healings that had occurred that day—be it healing of their own infirmities, or joy that a loved one had been healed. The energy must have been palpable; the crowd so swept up in the moment that when it came time to eat, it would have only been natural for everyone to want to share their meager provisions with those around them, with those whom they had been sharing this amazing experience. To share a celebratory meal, even if only of barley loaves and dried fish. Because they were already fed by Jesus' teachings, by his healing power, and by their collective joy.

Who's to say that is not a miracle? And if it did play out that way, as opposed to Jesus miraculously making food appear, who's to say that it was not because of Jesus' words and actions that motivated those present to share what they had? In which case, one could argue it ultimately was Jesus performing a miracle. Not necessarily of producing the food himself, but he did multiply the loaves and fishes nonetheless, because of his inspiration, because of the impact he had on those five thousand people. The actual miracle may not have been that he himself multiplied the loaves and fishes. The actual miracle may have been the transformation of the hearts of those present, so that they were willing to share what little they had. The byproduct of their transformation being the multiplication of five barley loaves and two fish into enough to fill all present and still having plenty of leftovers.

I am reminded of a similar multiplication of food, albeit indirectly, that occurred right here at St. Gregory's. One that continues to occur. We are all aware that the cornerstone of our outreach ministries is our Feeding Programs, comprised of our Food Bank and Feed My Lambs (which provides meals to unhoused guests at the St. Luke's Shower Program on the first Saturday of the month). Like all our outreach ministries, the Feeding Programs are not supported in our parish budget but rely on separate donations. By early 2019, we were experiencing some challenges with meeting the Feeding Programs' expenses. At our Annual Meeting that year, Bill Eldon, who oversees the Food Bank, and Tamera Benedict, who oversees Feed My Lambs, made an impassioned plea to the congregation, noting that funds were running short. Hearts were transformed and wallets were opened. Money designated for our Feeding Programs started pouring in. Not just at that meeting. The money continued to pour in during the pandemic and continues to this day. A significant shift from where we were five and a half years ago. One that we continue to marvel at as being a miracle. Thanks to the generosity of all of you.

Be it the feeding of the five thousand, be it the feeding of struggling families through our Food Bank, or be it the feeding of our unhoused siblings through Feed My Lambs, loaves and fishes have been and continue to be multiplied. And the source of all these miracles is Jesus. Regardless of whether it is Jesus actually multiplying and providing food for five thousand out of a mere five loaves and two fish, or whether his outpouring of love resulted in a transformation of the hearts and minds of those present, Jesus was responsible for the miracle. And he continues to work miracles today, in this place, by continuing to provide, through your generosity, for the needs of our ministries.

As one commentator notes, "Ministry is about multiplying resources so that what might have been a social handout becomes a revelation of amazing grace."<sup>1</sup> The feeding of the five thousand, as well as the ongoing support for our Feeding Programs are all examples of God's amazing grace at work—in the transformation of human hearts and in the outpouring of generosity. Proof that miracles continue to happen, if we just know where to look. That miracles continue to happen, if we are open to doing our part to help make them a reality.

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Marie Yust, "John 6:1-21, Pastoral Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary – Year B, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 286.