

“It’s a holy miracle!”

That’s what my Lutheran Sunday school teacher Gertrude Fjelstad used to answer when I raised my hand to question some Bible story I thought had no plausible explanation—miracles like a dry path parting the Red Sea or manna in the wilderness or Lazarus coming to life or this story about the loaves and fishes feeding 5000 people.

Mrs. Fjelstad would look at me with a twinkle in her eye and say “Anne, it’s a holy miracle.” I’m pretty sure she meant what our Lutheran church taught us: we know this is not literal fact, but it’s a good story and it’s our job to figure out its meaning for us today.

So here we are.

This story of the loaves and fishes shows up in all four gospels, in Matthew and Mark and Luke and John. We know that’s not the case with other events in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Each of the four gospel writers tell their story of Jesus in their own particular way, for their own particular community: only Luke and Matthew tell stories about the birth of Jesus, only John talks about the raising of Lazarus or the Samaritan woman. Matthew presents the Sermon on the Mount. When Luke presents some of that same material it is called the sermon on the plain.

But something about this feeding story captured the attention of all the chroniclers who gathered up the stories about this Jesus and recorded them for their communities. They all kept alive this story of the loaves and fishes.

This story was told by the early Christians whenever they gathered to share some bread. They broke bread and remembered that day when bread was miraculously blessed and broken and shared all around. They broke bread and remembered that day, and they remembered the ancient stories about bread raining down from heaven on their ancestors, the bread called manna.

They broke bread and remembered that something happened with those loaves of bread, and those portions of dried fish, something that caused them all to cherish this story and pass it on. What was it? Did the loaves grow? Did they multiply like the broom of Disney’s Sorcerer’s Apprentice? Matthew doesn’t tell us. And neither does Mark or Luke or John or anybody since.

What Matthew does tell us is that this miraculous feeding of the 5000 happened at a lonely place apart, a place, Matthew says, that Jesus finds right after he gets the news about John the Baptist. John is dead at the hand of Herod, his head served up on a platter.

Jesus had been telling the people about the kingdom of heaven, the new reign of God, he had been using images like the found treasure and the mustard seed to describe the abundance and the sheer joy God intends. Jesus had been announcing a new day where the grieving rejoice, the hungry are fed, the good win in the end, and then he learns that John, the prophet who baptized him, is murdered. The ways of the world, the ways of evil rulers like Herod, kill off the prophets of God, cut them down in the prime

of life. Sobering news for Jesus, for all the disciples. And Jesus withdraws to a quiet place.

The people follow. Just when Jesus might need to be alone, the crowds close in. And Jesus, showing them the largeness of God's heart, has compassion for them. He leaves his boat, goes ashore and mixes with them, blessing, touching, healing. It's day's end, and the disciples want to call it quits and settle down for the night. But Jesus knows the crowd needs food, and perhaps more than food, they need the nourishment of each other's company.

*"You give them something to eat."*

Jesus hands the task right back to the disciples. We are in this together. *You* give them something to eat. And so the disciples turn to the crowd.

Here comes the miracle.

No magic wand, no lightning bolts. But there is plenty of food. I'm imagining that everyone reaches into their pocket for their own piece of bread and adds it to the stuff being passed; perhaps they all really like this idea of being together here in a quiet place and they decide to share the pocketful of olives or raisins or bread or dried fish that they each carry.

And there is more than enough.

They turn toward each other, and share what they have. And there is more than enough.

What a miracle. What a day: They had started off in a place of need, probably sad and afraid with the word about King Herod's latest atrocity, in need of healing, in need of nourishment. And here they are, at the end of the day, full and satisfied with more than enough left over. They feel so full that they can be generous with each other. They feel large enough to give something away. What could be more miraculous?

Back in my Sunday School days, I always wished that I could time travel back to those miracle stories to see it for myself. I wanted to taste that bread, smell that fish; I wanted to see Lazarus for myself, I wanted to be in that garden with Mary on that third day. I wanted to see and feel and touch what it was really like.

But now, I realize that I live in the middle of that miracle.

Back in May, when I broke my arm, and found that I could do just about nothing, I found myself on the receiving end of baskets of loaves and fishes. My husband Randy and I were showered with unexpected abundance from unexpected sources. People surprised me--here at Trinity, at the library, in our neighborhood--they showed up with quarts of chicken soup and bowls of spaghetti sauce, and enchiladas, and the best pork tenderloin meal I've ever eaten. Nobody asked if we needed anything: they just showed up. And we had more than enough for weeks.

I am not sure I ever realized how healing food is, for body and soul, how food means communion and connection. I am not sure I ever realized that we all live in the middle of a miracle right here—from the nurture we share here at this table every week with bread and wine and every time we gather around food at Trinity.

Think of all the ways that Elizabeth gathers us and builds community around the sharing of food—not just at this table, but potlucks in the parish hall, brunches like last week with our neighbors from the mosque, Easter Vigil potluck celebrations, meals for our unhoused neighbors, meals for newcomers at the rectory, all the breakfasts and dinners, baking communion bread together, the fabulous annual Cookie Walk, so much more—the story of the feeding of the 5000 is alive and well at Trinity.

So I figure it's our job to carry on this story and keep telling it—not so much with our words, but our actions. Just as Matthew tells it, we are the ones now to turn toward each other and share what we have.

That's what President Obama named in his June speech at the opening of the new Obama Presidential Center in Chicago. He said that despite the current barrage of bad news, "people aren't looking for perpetual anger and division." He said, "They are looking for fairness and common sense and mutual respect, that deep in our gut, we want to find a way to turn towards each other..."

And then he went on to describe the ways that we have turned towards each other:

"I believe this because I've seen it all across our country, in cities that have worked together to reclaim their streets from crime, in rural communities that have rebuilt their economy, in businesses that are finding new ways to make housing affordable, in those ordinary people in Minneapolis/[the Twin Cities] who braved frigid temperatures, risking their own safety, standing shoulder to shoulder to look out for their neighbors and sometimes look out for strangers because they knew that was the right thing to do."

"...deep in our gut," he said, "we want to find a way to turn towards each other. . ."

We do. So let's turn. Herod did not have the last word then, and Herod doesn't have the last word now. Let's find a way—all kinds of ways—to turn toward each other and share what we have. Let's make a holy miracle!

Amen.