



# ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

## Sermon by Pastor Jami Anderson, July 31, 2011

This week I read a wonderful sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor called, “The problem with miracles” and it has guided my words and thoughts that I share today.

Today it’s a story – a story about a day in the life of Jesus. True, we consider it a miracle story, as do all four gospel writers. But I find that first and foremost this is a story about Jesus in relationship with God, and the Holy Spirit, and with us human beings. This story is a glimpse into the world we share with the trinity and with each other. This is a story where every element in it – nearly every word in it is important, is significant.

It is a story woven into the entire story about Jesus that Matthew is telling us. This reading is merely a snippet from the wonderful unfolding of all we can learn reading through a book of the gospels. You see, right before our reading today we learn, as does Jesus, that his cousin and friend and fellow prophet – John the Baptist – has just been beheaded. Then comes the line, “Jesus withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself.” We can empathize with his action – he wants to retreat, perhaps cry, perhaps pray, perhaps wonder about his own safety, perhaps wonder about a whole multitude of things.

But when the crowds heard it – *it* probably being the news about John the Baptist, or perhaps that Jesus had moved into a new area of the country – in either case – they followed him on foot from the towns. Jesus is not to be left alone. Do the crowds want to comfort him, or do they want to receive something from him? We aren’t told what the crowds want, but we are told that Jesus saw them and had compassion for them and cured their sick.

That is Jesus for you – willing to pay attention to us – willing to share himself with us – willing to be present. Jesus recognized their needs – they were sick, they were sad, they were hungry for many things, and while anyone but the son of God might have ordered them to get lost, Jesus has compassion on them. He spent the day walking amongst them, touching them, listening to them, saying the things they needed to hear. Can you imagine it – it’s a wonderful vision of a day in the life of Jesus.

And then evening comes and the disciples say to Jesus that it is time for rest, it is time to send people away. He has done enough for them and everyone would need something to eat before night fell. I doubt the disciples were being unfeeling, probably they were being practical, caring even. They knew that people would be hungry. They knew folks would have to travel to find a source of food and shelter.

But Jesus has another idea about practicality and care. He says, “They need not go away.” They need not go away. In other words, let us all stay together, let us remain in community for awhile longer. I think he realizes that sometimes, after very bad news, it does not matter what or when you eat, as long as you eat it with someone else, as long as you are not alone, as long as others share the experience with you.

So Jesus says, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” Notice he does not say, “I will give them something to eat.” He doesn’t say, where are the people who can cater and cook for us – let’s call them out. Could this be a moment for us of insight into the life of being a disciple? Don’t just wait around for God or a miracle or some other helper to appear – YOU give them something to eat. I imagine those guys are stammering when they tell him that all they know of for food in the area are five loaves of bread and two salted fish. And that’s just not going to cut it. At best they will look like fools, at worst the crowd may get angry, hostile, pushy for a bite to eat. At that moment I bet Jesus just isn’t making sense to them, and he’s including them in his foolishness.

But let’s take a moment to imagine the scene from the viewpoint of Jesus. He looked at the same situation as the disciples, but where they saw not enough, he saw plenty: plenty of time, plenty of food, plenty of possibilities as yet unseen. Perhaps he didn’t quite know how it would all work out – he was human and in a human situation. But he was also divine and what Jesus knew beyond a shadow of doubt, is that wherever there was plenty of God, there would be plenty of everything else. In God’s creation, there is abundance.

So he has the disciples bring him the food and he looks up to heaven, he draws upon God, and He blesses this food, and then he gives it back to the disciples to share with others.

So, here starts the miracle part. Did the bread just start growing before their eyes? When someone took off a piece of bread, did the loaf suddenly renew itself? Did new loaves appear when no one was looking? Did more meat keep reappearing on the fish? I don’t know and I bet that most of the people there didn’t even really know what was going on, either.

I mean, imagine 5,000 people sitting on the ground, along with unnumbered women and children. Think about the size of that crowd. Even if they could get a glimpse of Jesus, the best they probably could understand was that he raised some bread and fish up towards heaven and said a blessing. Perhaps as the baskets started to be passed around, people realized that now was the time to eat. And so from their pockets came the wrapped piece of meat they had brought along, or the chunk of bread from breakfast, or the few raisins they had grabbed when starting out to go to this deserted place. Wouldn’t you have done that? If you knew your plan was to find and follow Jesus out into the country – you would probably take a little food with you.

You wouldn’t have taken enough food for everyone. You wouldn’t have known what the plan would be for the entire day, or days to follow. So, you were just going along, winging it, taking it moment by moment. And now food was being passed around. And perhaps if you had a little extra you put it in the food basket when it came by – so that when those baskets returned to the front – there was more bread in them than when they started out!

Does that qualify as a miracle? I told you that I think this story tells us about the trinity and about our humanity. So, to me here is where the Holy Spirit is present. As those humble baskets are passed around, I think the Holy Spirit transforms people into having a sense of plenty, the Spirit takes away their fear of not having enough, their fear of going hungry, their sense of taking care of only themselves, of thinking that they have look out for their own interests, that they have to live with common sense. And those moments were and are a miracle.

You see, if a miracle has to be only about what God alone is doing, then we can sit back and wait and observe. We could say, let God do the work, let God step in, let God save the world. And we can justify that attitude because for all practical purposes, what we have to offer is not enough. We can't feed everyone who is hungry. We can't make a big difference. And we place high value on common sense.

But listen again to what Jesus says, "You give them something to eat." Not Jesus, but you. Not my bread, but what is available. Not somewhere else or someone else, but right here.

So, I guess none of us will ever really know what happened along that shoreline in a deserted place. But if this story is here to tell us about God, and Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, and ourselves, then what Jesus says to his disciples, he says to us. Don't send people away, heal them, be present with them, give them something to eat. And if that frightens us or seems impossible, remember what his next words were to the disciples, "Bring them here to me." Bring me what you have, let me bless it. That is where to begin, now and always.

I close with a prayer from "The Book of Uncommon Prayer." It is a prayer called, "Miracles." "God, we can do miracles. The world looks at us and says, "Where is your God when so many are hungry? Your God doesn't care!" The world is wrong. We know you love us, God. Why? Because you gave us hands to make bread – so the hungry can eat. Because you gave us the skill to build houses – so homeless people can stay dry and warm. Because you gave us each other – so we wouldn't be lonely. We can show the world exactly where you are, God. You live in our world because you live in us! We won't wait for the hungry, homeless, and lonely to come to us for help – we will go find them. Just as you did, Lord. Thank you for coming to earth and finding us. Amen.

Thanks be to God.