



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

9th Sunday after Pentecost: August 2, 2020

Sermon Title: "It was a miracle!"

Gospel Text: Matthew 14:13-21

Some days when I'm busy, distracted, or maybe just not paying attention, I don't remember simple things, like what I ate for breakfast or where I put my car keys. But other days, things happen that are unforgettable, vividly burned into my memory forever. We all have some memories like that: wonderful things like the birth of a child, a wedding, or a graduation. Traumatic moments can likewise live with us forever.

These memories become the fabric of our lives and our heritage. We hand them down from generation-to-generation. They are just as important as the silverware we pass to our heirs, because those memories reveal so much about how God has been present in our lives.

The power of memorable experiences and stories is the very reason we have today's Gospel lesson. The memory of Jesus feeding over 5,000 people with just five loaves of bread and two fish points to what must have been an unforgettable experience – something so important that it's one of the few stories that appears in all four of the Gospels.

Unfortunately, when we read this story we can get so focused on its particulars that we fail to see how it has any application to our time and place. And so today let's explore how this story provides us with a lens – a vocabulary – a perspective – for understanding our own story. You see, I believe that *history* helps us to understand *scripture*. But I also believe that *scripture* helps us to understand our *history*. So let's imagine what it might be like in a decade or two when my future granddaughter asks me what I remember about a time in history none of us will ever forget.

[Knock at the door] *"Hey Grandpa, can I talk to you for a couple minutes? I've got a school assignment for history class."*

"Sure sweetie. Come on in. What are you studying?"

"Oh it's the Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020. We're supposed to interview someone who lived through it and find out what it was like. You were alive back then, weren't you?"

"Oh yes. I was alive then. I'll never forget it! I don't think anyone who lived through it could ever forget it. So what do you want to know?"

"Well Grandpa, it sounds like everything was a mess. People were getting sick, and the whole world was in chaos. You were a pastor at Grace Lutheran, right? So how did the church survive the pandemic?"

“Yes. You’re right. It was a really hard time for everybody, including the church. One of the hardest things I ever had to do was to suspend in-person worship. But in the midst of all of that chaos and fear and uncertainty, it helped me and I think it helped others to understand what we were going through by exploring how Jesus had gotten people through other hard times. One of the stories I found especially helpful was the story of the Feeding of the 5,000, in Matthew’s Gospel.”

“Hold on Grandpa. The pandemic was about a virus. I know for a while people worried about running out of toilet paper, but I don’t remember hearing anything in history class about people running out of food.”

“You’re right, the Pandemic of 2020 was about a virus, not food, but there are lots of connections between that Bible story and what we went through with the pandemic. To begin with, both involved fear. You see, a great crowd had assembled in a deserted place, because they wanted to hear Jesus and be healed by Jesus. The disciples were very frightened. Here were thousands of people in the middle of nowhere and the disciples had no idea how they would ever feed them or properly care for them. And so their first idea was to ask Jesus to send everyone away.”

“That idea sort of makes sense, Grandpa. So is that what he did?”

“Oh no. Jesus had so much love for them. He didn’t want them to go away. I’m sure that worried the disciples even more. That’s how we felt at the church. We were so worried about our people. It would’ve been a lot easier if we could have persuaded Jesus to send everyone home and allow us all to take a nice long break. But that wasn’t Jesus’s plan for us either. He loved his followers in 2020 just as much as he did 2,000 years ago.”

“OK, so then Jesus just fixed everything for everyone, right?”

“Well, that would’ve been nice! But it didn’t work out quite that way for us or for the disciples. Do you remember what he said to the disciples? He looked at them and said, ‘You give them something to eat.’ It must have really annoyed them. What were they supposed to do? All they had was five loaves and two fish. It was the same for us at Grace. Nearly everything our church did was centered on in-person relationships. They were the glue that held us together as a church family. We really wondered if we could survive without it. Everything churches had been doing for nearly 2,000 years suddenly had to be reimaged, rethought, and reinvented. It felt a little like having nothing but a few loaves and fishes.”

“So what did you do, Grandpa?”

“Well, we did what the disciples did. We handed over to Jesus what little we had, and asked for his blessing, hoping he might find a way to multiply it so that everyone could somehow be fed, connected, and cared for. What happened next was just as much a miracle as him feeding those 5,000 people. With Jesus’s blessing things quickly came together for us. Members made phone calls to check-in on people. We pastors were able to adapt and change in ways we never would’ve thought possible. We used new technologies to hold meetings, worship, and study the Bible. We used old technology in new ways too. The radio broadcasts helped us feel like we were together, plus we could sing at the top of our lungs from home without any infection fears. Thanks to an army of volunteers, we worshiped in a gym, in parks, and in our homes. And no matter where we were, we discovered that Jesus was there too! It was a miracle!”

“Are you sure that was a miracle, Gramps? It just sounds like people put aside their fears, trusted in Jesus, and started working together.”

“Well, dear, think about what you just said. The world was mighty divided back in 2020, but in hindsight it’d been that way for a long time. And so for people to set fears aside, trust in Jesus, and come together was a miracle indeed. I don’t think it was all that different from what happened to the disciples and those thousands of hungry people. I can’t explain how Jesus fed all those people, and I’m not sure I can explain how Jesus not only kept our church together but enabled it to thrive in new and surprising ways. But this I know for sure – that’s what happened, and I give all the credit to Jesus, just like the disciples did. None of us will ever forget that time. We lived through a miracle. That’s why we keep talking about it. It gives us hope and courage for all the other scary times we will ever face.”

“Wow Grandpa. I think I understand now. Did you share this story with your congregation back then?”

“Yes I did. Scripture always helps us understand ourselves and our times with greater clarity. I also told my people how much I love them and, more importantly, how much Jesus loves them. Life is full of ups and downs. We can’t always count on things being happy, safe, and perfect. But what we can count on is Jesus. He will always be with us and will always help us get through the toughest of times. That’s how love works – it pushes out fear. I know that because I lived it, and I’ll never forget it. Sweetie, your generation will have tough times too. So when it happens, don’t be afraid. Study scripture and keep close to Jesus, because he loves you eternally. Yep, keep close to Jesus... and expect a miracle.” Amen.