

Amazing and Wondrous By Reverend Litton Logan

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Scriptures:

¹³Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and healed their sick. ¹⁵When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children. (Matthew 14: 13-21 RSV)

Introduction and Comments:

These two guys for some reason were trying to measure a telephone pole. They attempted to climb the pole and drop a tape measure, only to slide down in the process. Along comes this big, muscular dude and says, "Hey, what are you guys doing?"

The two guys say, "We're trying to measure the height of this pole."

The big man wraps his arms around the pole, pulls it out of the ground, lays it down and measures it. Then he picks it up, puts it back in the ground, says "40 feet" and walks away.

One guy says to the other, "What a stupid idiot - we wanted the *height*, not the length." Keep this story in mind as we look at our text today.

Sermon:

Many modern people envision the story we've heard read today as a History Channel docudrama, set in a land far, far away and at a time long, long ago before the forces of nature became fixed. We have traditionally called such New Testament stories about mass feedings and their counterparts of healings and exorcisms, miracles.

This word miracle or the miraculous that we bandy about so freely is a term that did not gain its current connotations of the supernatural until the 18th century, the so-called Age of Reason. The word miracle or miraculous comes from the Latin, *miraculum*, and simply means something or someone that causes wonder or amazement. There are several Hebrew and Greek words in the bible that are used to describe events as we've heard today and they also carry just the implications of amazing or wondrous manifestations or signs. I want to emphasize that none of these terms originally carried the modern concepts of miracle, wherein the natural laws of cause and effect are warped or suspended. (Horsley, 8-19) For the ancients, there was no natural or supernatural world, just reality populated by various forces or spirits - some good, some bad. For Jesus, his audiences, and subsequent Jesus communities, God was the ever present and permeating power and medium of reality at work at various levels.

Thus, in Matthew's Gospel this morning I would like us to try and see Jesus as a Galilean itinerant, wonder-causing, prophetic son-of God, whose ministry signals or signs the nature of the soon to arrive Kingdom of God.

I also want to point out that some notable modern scholars such as Dominic Crossan, the Irish-American, ex-Catholic priest and co-founder of the Jesus Seminar, who is often featured on the History Channel's religious documentaries, understands Jesus' various signs and wonders as acts of magic. Although I like Crossan and some of his scholarship, as controversial as it is, I and many others believe he is wrong on this point about Jesus using magic for several reasons. The biggest reason for me is that nowhere in the gospels did any of Jesus' enemies ever accuse him of being a magician or using magic. They accused him of everything else, including being in league with the Prince of Demons, but not being a magician or using magic. This may be in part because as much as magic was associated with charlatans in Jesus' day as in ours, it would also have been associated with the wise or learned such as the three wise men or magi, where we get the word magic. So, I doubt Jesus' enemies would have run the risk of labeling him a magi or magician. Therefore, let us hear Matthew recalling this story about Jesus from a much earlier time for the needs of his outsider, urban community of Jesus-believing Jews with a smattering of non-Israelite believers thrown in.

One of the questions we can rightly ask of this text is whether we can get a clear glimpse of Jesus and his peasant audiences from our urban Matthew? I think we can and I'll try to do that this morning. However, my caveat is that I think applying modern terms such as the miraculous or miracle to our story today not only distorts it but makes it into something it was never intended to be for Matthew's audience or anyone else for that matter. (Horsley, p. 28)

In Matthew chapter 13, Jesus has taught about the Kingdom of God and the criteria for Kingdom citizenship, which defied most people's expectations. In the opening verses of chapter 14, we read of John the Baptist's execution. Jesus was distraught and rightly so over the death of what we gather from Matthew's Gospel was his beloved mentor. I think Jesus needed to be alone, to grieve, and to contemplate the implications of John's death for himself and his ministry. I mean, if the powers that be will kill a popular and powerful prophet like John, where do Jesus and his disciples stand? To this end, as we learned earlier in chapter 13, Jesus being near a lake, most likely the fishing village of about 1500 people called Capernaum on the north end of the sea of Galilee, took a boat to a deserted place away from the village. I also might mention that Capernaum was the center for Jesus public ministry.

However, the crowd of disenfranchised, marginalized, and oppressed, working-class Galilean peasants, the 'am ha aretz, the ignoramuses of the land as some rabbis called them, that had been with Jesus throughout the day would not leave him. Matthew indicates that Jesus was more than some diversion or curiosity for these peasants - the people needed him; they needed his hopeful, authoritative teachings, they needed to hear his well-reasoned and well-stated words that told them they were valuable and acceptable before God. They also needed his healing powers. Therefore, Jesus taught, preached, and healed the people way into the afternoon. The NRSV uses the word cure instead of heal; however, the Greek is θεραπεύω, *therapeuō*, whose dominant meanings, in order of importance, are: to serve, do services, to heal, cure, restore to health¹, with restoration of health having physical and social implications in Jesus' culture.

The disciples told Jesus he needed to draw things to a close, it was getting late, send the folks back to the village to get food; not to mention, it was also getting late enough that people needed to start thinking about shelter, no one wanted to be caught out in the wilderness, the deserted place, at dark.

Remember, Matthew's urban Jesus-community, many of whom were also oppressed, marginalized, and no longer able to fully participate in their normal worlds of family, friends, or synagogue are looking in on this story. Jesus told his disciples there was no need to send the

¹ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G2323&t=RSV>

people away, feed them with what they had on hand. It is worth noting again that Jesus and the crowd are in a deserted place - the wilderness, a place symbolic of the demonic, chaos, testing, discernment, and change. People, didn't go outside villages to deserted places to have a picnic or while away their leisure hours.

Speaking of leisure hours, given that so many people were present, we may assume that this event took place in the summer or during the off-hours for fishing, when labor demands would have been low, and people had time to go out and listen to an itinerant, wonder-causing prophet, who proclaimed that they were blessed; that is, favored and honored by God and soon to be the recipients of even greater honor and prosperity. So, what discernment and changes do you think came about in that deserted place for the crowd, Jesus, and the disciples?

Before I address this, let me mention that there is something special about the fishes and the loaves. Most of the caloric intake of Palestinian peasants would have come from grains, oil, and wine, along with some dairy products and vegetables. The peasants would not have had meat or flesh foods except on very, very rare occasions. As a rule, one did not kill renewable sources of food, fuel, and fiber. However, fish, salted or dried, although hard to come by inland, would have been a very desirable and a sometime Sabbath dish - like grandma's Sunday pot-roast (Malina and Rohrbaugh, 1497-1517). Only salted or dried fish, unlike grandma's pot-roast, did not have to be cooked or prepared on the Sabbath.

So, here was Jesus, a grieving, questioning, and self-evaluating prophet of God out in a deserted place with a bunch of down-trodden, working-class peasants in the off-hours of fishing or on summer break, whom we gather were seeking their own well-being physically and socially. Now, responding to the people's physical needs, Jesus made a special Sabbath, (שַׁבָּת *šabbat*) or holy-day dinner for them from the meager fare on hand and had plenty left over.

Now questions as to how or whether God supernaturally replicated the atomic structure of the fish and bread at Jesus' request, which we have no mention of, only a prayer of blessing, are inappropriate because such questions takes our eyes off the text and quite honestly, misfocuses them on heaven. Furthermore, I believe that such questions about the supernatural trivializes God's power, presence, and methods of working in the world that are practical, empirical, and available to all people of faith anywhere and at any time.

Think for a moment: Jesus and his disciples traveled around the country, living off the good will and support of others. There is never any mention in the gospels that Jesus and his disciples went hungry or wanting; no mention that Jesus ever fixed a meal for himself and his disciples in some Star Trek divine, food replicator. Only in John's Gospel, chapter 21, do we see a resurrected Jesus fixing a meal of fish over a fire and laying out bread for his disciples, but there is no information about where and when he got the fish he cooked or the bread he laid out.

Remember, Jesus had been telling people what the Kingdom of God was not like, what not to expect; now however, he seems to be giving a very practical demonstration of its nature, which I believe is capable of being replicated anywhere and anytime. The characteristics of the Kingdom are that the sick and diseased, the maimed, the oppressed will be healed and thereby socially restored to a state of honorable self-determination. No more oppression, no more injustice, no more diseases, no more hunger, when the kingdom arrives.

Matthew also wants to communicate this to his community of Jesus followers, who desperately need to hear that God will not leave them alone or without help, no matter the time, where they are, or who they are with. To these points, the gospel writer understood that God will use those people and their resources at hand, as meager as they may be at times, to bless and care for those who are in need, hurting, scared, and on the outside looking in as it were. Jesus' audience would have simply been amazed and appreciative that what was needed at the time, food, was provided for them, then and there, rather than them having to go home to eat. But, I

think they would have been more impressed with the fact that they were not sent away, discounted, uncared for by this holy one of God like they were by many of their religious leaders. Jesus did not send them away to fend for themselves out of their own means and resources. Truly, that day those in the crowd would have been changed and saw themselves as valuable, significant to God, through the holy company of Jesus.

Matthew's church would have heard this story of Jesus feeding an unbelievable number of people as more than one of those rah, rah, outsiders-versus-insiders motivational stories. Remember, Jesus' crowd and Matthew's church had heard about God being the source of an extravagant harvest; the one who will sort out the true people of God from those that are pretenders and children of the evil one, and how the Good News in Jesus Christ will corrupt the expectations of many, especially the powerful and self-righteous. Those faithful peasants in Jesus' audiences and those people in Matthew's church are the "least", those who shall be the greatest and will lead the honor parade into the Kingdom of Heaven well ahead of those pious and self-righteous people with their grandiose expectations for themselves. These peasants would have heard, and I believe Matthew's audiences would also have heard and learned, that disciples of Christ are not to turn any of their brothers and sisters away from table or fellowship, regardless of who they are because in Christ we will always have enough of God's healing and restorative spirit to go around that will call us to use whatever is on hand for God's people.

I think Jesus learned that day in the face of the people's many needs that he needed to continue his ministry of reforming the thoughts, beliefs, and practices of his people no matter what the cost to himself.

My experience has been that rarely is the scarcity of food or material resources the major cause of pain and heartache among Christians, but rather it is brothers and sisters in Christ excluding one another from community and fellowship just like many of the pious Jews did in Jesus' and Matthew's day. The people of the land were denigrated, abused, and excluded by their own Jewish brothers and sisters of faith, based upon foolish, ignorant, and self-serving interpretations of scripture. Therefore, those of Christ, who wish to worship and fellowship in peace and mutual respect should never be denied, never turned away from table or fellowship or the spiritual or material largesse of Christ's people.

Sounds great, doesn't it? Yeah, but Jesus and Matthew expected the kingdom any day; they didn't think that things would drag on for over two-plus centuries, giving rise to all sorts of weird Christian birds trying to build their nest in the mustard plants. If Christians are to ever become as accepting of one another as Jesus tried to teach his Jewish audiences to be, which they failed to do, it will literally take the Kingdom of Heaven coming on earth to warp or suspend our natural proclivities to categorize, judge, and exclude. I mean, just think about all the historical hell, aggravation, and grief it took to open the Gospel of Jesus Christ up to all us non-Israelite believers.

Again, I stress in our text today that we must hear Jesus speaking about and demonstrating Kingdom values lived out on this side of the Kingdom of Heaven in preparation of its arrival along with his criteria for Kingdom citizenship.

Therefore, let me close on an upbeat. I am so amazed at the wondrous feedings, clothing, sheltering and physical, spiritual, and social healings accomplished by people motivated by their love of God in Jesus Christ through just the natural process of this world, aren't you? Folks, we don't need to have the laws of cause and effect suspended or warped, we just need to be open to receive and support God's healing people and use what we have on hand for the benefit of our brothers and sisters in Christ and a world at odds with its own interests.

Therefore, let us see and understand miracles or amazing and wondrous events as human beings participating in higher levels of God at work in the world to heal, restore, and bless our

lives, the lives of others, and the world. I fear too often we become so heavenly or supernaturally focused that we are no earthly good.

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