

“Miracles and Unbelief”

John 6:1-21

Rev. Jeff Allen

July 26, 2009

When I was a young boy, I always had a fascination with magic. Now this was way before Harry Potter, so it wasn't wizardry that I was connecting with, it was more about magicians. You know...card tricks, levitation, disappearing acts, sawing pretty ladies in half. I would beg my mom to take me to see David Copperfield or Blackstone when they were in town. Back when they still had magic shops, I just had to go whenever I could, and I couldn't leave the shop without buying some new trick or a special deck of cards that would allow me to amaze my friends and family.

It may not come as a surprise then to find out that the miracle stories of Jesus that are told in this morning's Gospel text have always been my favorite. Such amazing and magical acts Jesus was able to do. I loved those stories from an early age, and I actually have proof of it.

My grandmother, Granny Foy, was the spiritual rock of our family. I cannot remember a time when I visited her that she didn't have a Bible near her chair. As her eyes failed, we would buy her larger and larger print Bibles and magnifying glasses. As her strength failed, she would tear the Bible into its separate books so they would be light enough to hold while she read.

Granny loved to tell me the stories of Jesus all the time when I was a little boy, and I loved to sit on her lap and listen. She gave me this little red Bible on July 1, 1978 – I was four and a half years old at the time. In it, she had underlined my favorite stories, and on the inside front cover, she made a note to tell me what page those stories were on so that I could find them faster. At the top of the list: “Page 192 – Jesus walked on the water.” I remember using her note many times to find that story.

In the imagination of my childhood, Jesus could do amazing and powerful things. He was full of mystery and surprise – just like David Copperfield or Blackstone. Now I knew, as a child, that magic tricks were simply that – tricks. And I knew that Jesus wasn't simply a magician. Jesus was something special. His miracles were real, and they displayed the power of God.

As a grown up (well most of the time), what am I to do with these miracle stories of Jesus? I'm reminded of that verse toward the end of 1 Corinthians 13. It's one that doesn't get read as much at weddings. You know, the verse where Paul writes, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.”¹ And so I wonder, are the miracles of Jesus and other amazing things that happen in the Bible simply childhood fantasies that need to be discarded now that I'm an adult? I have to admit that I'm torn about the answer to that question.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:11

What I do know is that these miracle stories are the kind of stories that cause many adults to stray away from religion. We tell stories like this all the time to children, and it's important that we do. But often we stop with the children's version. I think the church fails when it does not encourage people to engage the scriptures at a level that is appropriate for their age. I think that there are far too many adults who have never been encouraged to move beyond a child-like faith, or given opportunities to do so. And that's when faith begins to break down for many folks.

Can Jesus take five loaves and two fishes and feed five thousand people? Can Jesus really walk on water? Can Jonah really get swallowed by a whale and live to tell the tale? Can someone who has died really come back to life?

If you're asking these questions to a child, the answer is more likely to be, "Sure! Of course! Why not?" If animals can talk, and monsters can sing and dance and teach the alphabet, if teddy bears can have birthday parties, then why can't all those things in the Bible also be true?

Now ask those same questions to an adult, and you may get a variety of answers. On the one side, some might say, "Of course all those things can be true. How can we place a limit on the power of God? God can do anything God wants to do." On the other side, others might respond with, "You know, I just can't go there with you. If you're asking me to believe all these miracles and other things, I just can't. There's no way. Those stories defy the laws of nature, and anyone with a reasonable mind would be silly to believe them."

These two viewpoints represent the two extremes of belief, and we all fall somewhere on the spectrum from one to another. I know a number of good, faithful people who fall on differing sides of the spectrum. So I'm not necessarily here to tell you that one way of believing is better than the other, I'm here to tell you what I think is the good news! No matter where you fall on that spectrum, it's okay. You can still be a faithful Christian and have different understandings about these kinds of Biblical stories.

So what are the ways we can approach the stories in today's text? I've found a variety of valid responses. Let's start with the first story about the feeding of the five thousand. I've heard three compelling ways of understanding this story. The first is the most straightforward, and is the basic way we explain the story to our children. Simply taking it at its face value, we could allow that Jesus truly did perform a miracle with those five loaves and two fishes and fed five thousand people to their fill, with twelve baskets of food left over.

If we're a little skeptical about the miraculous, there's a second way we could understand the story. This second way is a bit more theological. According to the scripture, "Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated."² Sound familiar? Sound like what we remember each time we have

² John 6:11a

communion? Maybe this was a sacramental meal, much like what we experience in Holy Communion. Maybe the way the five loaves and two fishes fed everyone was that each person took just a small piece, like we do with communion. The story says that they each had their fill. Maybe it was a different kind of appetite that was filled through this meal. Maybe their deep hunger to be fulfilled was satisfied in the way that only Jesus Christ can. I like this way of thinking about it.

William Barclay beautifully describes a third option. It's one that I had heard before, but I really like the way he puts it. He says, "There may be another and very lovely explanation. It is scarcely to be thought that the crowd left on a nine-mile expedition without making any preparations at all. If there were pilgrims with them, they would certainly possess supplies for the way. But it may be that they would not produce what they had, for they selfishly – and very humanly – wished to keep it all for themselves. It may then be that Jesus, with that rare smile of his, produced the little store that he and his disciples had; with sunny faith he thanked God for it and shared it out. Moved by his example, everyone who had anything did the same; and in the end there was enough, and more than enough, for all.

Barclay continues, "It may be that this is a miracle in which the presence of Jesus turned a crowd of selfish men and women into a fellowship of sharers. It may be that this story represents the biggest miracle of all – one which changed not loaves and fishes, but men and women."³ What a beautiful way of understanding the story.

I've experienced this kind of miracle. I'm able to experience it over and over again, every time I serve at the United Methodist Free Store. I've only worked at the one on the west side, so I can only speak from those experiences. They have a room in the back of the store that is about twenty feet by twenty feet square. In the room is a pile of bags filled with clothing. I call the pile the "Mount of Abundance." I've never been there when the pile was not taller than I am. Whenever I have worked there, my job has always been to open up the bags, sort the clothes, and put them on hangers to be given away in the front of the store.

Each time I work at the store, the pile never seems to go down. I'm the kind of guy who loves to get a job done, so I would love to get all the bags emptied, sorted and hung, so I could see a nice clean floor. I've never seen that happen. You see, while we're emptying and sorting bags and hanging clothes, there are people dropping off more bags of clothes. The pile seems like it never goes down. I clearly remember the time I was working the pile and I realized that what I was feeling must have been similar to what the disciples experienced while feeding the five thousand. The baskets never really got empty, and the pile of clothes never went down, as long as people continued to share what they had.

Well, that's the first miracle story in today's text. The other is my old favorite about Jesus walking on the water. As the story goes, Jesus had gone away by himself. When evening came, the disciples went down to the sea, got in a boat, and headed across the sea

³ Barclay, William. "The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of John, Volume One." Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. P. 238.

in the dark toward Capernaum. The sea became rough and the wind was blowing. The disciples had rowed three or four miles when they saw Jesus walking on the water near the boat. They were afraid, but Jesus said, "It is I, do not be afraid." The disciples wanted him to get in the boat with them, but immediately they were at the shore where they were headed.

The way we have understood this story from our childhood is to picture Jesus, calmly walking on top of the water toward the boat. We can certainly say that Jesus, as the son of God, was able to walk on the water and zip the boat to the shore when the disciples asked him to get in. This understanding speaks of the incredible power of God available through Jesus, and that when the going gets tough, Jesus will be there for us in miraculous ways.

If you can't go with the miraculous explanation, there is another way to understand the story. The Greek preposition "epi" that we translate as "on" when we speak of Jesus walking "on" the water can have a number of different meanings, including on, upon; over; at, by; before, in the presence of; when, under, at the time of. So it is possible that the original Greek meaning was not that Jesus was walking "on" the water, but that Jesus was walking "near" the water, "by" the water, or even "under" the water.

Additionally, the distance of the trip is helpful to know. The disciples started out at Bethsaida, and were travelling to Capernaum. It's about four miles across the sea from Bethsaida to Capernaum. So, when the scripture says that the disciples had already rowed three to four miles, and that their boat immediately reached shore, it is possible that Jesus was following them along the shoreline and they didn't know it. By the time they met up with Jesus, they were almost to the end of the trip, which explains how they "immediately" reached their destination. This understanding might tell us that Jesus is watching us as we go along, letting us struggle on our own, but coming to us when we really need him, giving us the encouragement that we need for that last, most tiring leg of the journey.

You see, I believe that the truth of the scriptures is best found when we are able to hold on to the truth available in all the different ways to understand the scriptures rather than holding one interpretation and discarding all the rest. Take, for instance, today's story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. How much more meaningful can that story be when we allow it to help us understand the miraculous power of Jesus, along with the sacramental nature of the scene as well as the sharing of resources that Jesus initiates. Through the story of Jesus walking on water, we can understand that Jesus can come to us in miraculous and powerful ways when we need him, and we can also understand that Jesus is present all along the way, coming to us when we need him most to get us through the really tough parts, but letting us figure things out on our own most of the way. Any one interpretation is valid, but when you add the various interpretations together, you get something much more beautiful and meaningful.

I think the call to Christian discipleship from this morning's text is to look for the other interpretations of scripture that can make our faith more robust. If you're solidly on

either end of the spectrum, maybe it's time to open up to the other possibilities. If you've sworn off all belief in miracles, maybe it's time to consider that the miraculous isn't necessarily impossible. If you are still holding on to the children's version of the story, maybe it's time to consider some other ways to understand the story. As we do, I believe the stories of our faith will become more meaningful, and will truly have the power to transform our lives. May we be a people who are open enough to allow that to happen.

“Miracles and Unbelief”

John 6:1-21

Rev. Jeff Allen

July 26, 2009

When I was a young boy, I always had a fascination with magic. Now this was way before Harry Potter, so it wasn't wizardry that I was connecting with, it was more about magicians. You know...card tricks, levitation, disappearing acts, sawing pretty ladies in half. I would beg my mom to take me to see David Copperfield or Blackstone when they were in town. Back when they still had magic shops, I just had to go whenever I could, and I couldn't leave the shop without buying some new trick or a special deck of cards that would allow me to amaze my friends and family.

It may not come as a surprise then to find out that the miracle stories of Jesus that are told in this morning's Gospel text have always been my favorite. Such amazing and magical acts Jesus was able to do. I loved those stories from an early age, and I actually have proof of it.

My grandmother, Granny Foy, was the spiritual rock of our family. I cannot remember a time when I visited her that she didn't have a Bible near her chair. As her eyes failed, we would buy her larger and larger print Bibles and magnifying glasses. As her strength failed, she would tear the Bible into its separate books so they would be light enough to hold while she read.

Granny loved to tell me the stories of Jesus all the time when I was a little boy, and I loved to sit on her lap and listen. She gave me this little red Bible on July 1, 1978 – I was four and a half years old at the time. In it, she had underlined my favorite stories, and on the inside front cover, she made a note to tell me what page those stories were on so that I could find them faster. At the top of the list: “Page 192 – Jesus walked on the water.” I remember using her note many times to find that story.

In the imagination of my childhood, Jesus could do amazing and powerful things. He was full of mystery and surprise – just like David Copperfield or Blackstone. Now I knew, as a child, that magic tricks were simply that – tricks. And I knew that Jesus wasn't simply a magician. Jesus was something special. His miracles were real, and they displayed the power of God.

As a grown up (well most of the time), what am I to do with these miracle stories of Jesus? I'm reminded of that verse toward the end of 1 Corinthians 13. It's one that doesn't get read as much at weddings. You know, the verse where Paul writes, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.”¹ And so I wonder, are the miracles of Jesus and other amazing things that happen in the Bible simply childhood fantasies that need to be discarded now that I'm an adult? I have to admit that I'm torn about the answer to that question.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:11

What I do know is that these miracle stories are the kind of stories that cause many adults to stray away from religion. We tell stories like this all the time to children, and it's important that we do. But often we stop with the children's version. I think the church fails when it does not encourage people to engage the scriptures at a level that is appropriate for their age. I think that there are far too many adults who have never been encouraged to move beyond a child-like faith, or given opportunities to do so. And that's when faith begins to break down for many folks.

Can Jesus take five loaves and two fishes and feed five thousand people? Can Jesus really walk on water? Can Jonah really get swallowed by a whale and live to tell the tale? Can someone who has died really come back to life?

If you're asking these questions to a child, the answer is more likely to be, "Sure! Of course! Why not?" If animals can talk, and monsters can sing and dance and teach the alphabet, if teddy bears can have birthday parties, then why can't all those things in the Bible also be true?

Now ask those same questions to an adult, and you may get a variety of answers. On the one side, some might say, "Of course all those things can be true. How can we place a limit on the power of God? God can do anything God wants to do." On the other side, others might respond with, "You know, I just can't go there with you. If you're asking me to believe all these miracles and other things, I just can't. There's no way. Those stories defy the laws of nature, and anyone with a reasonable mind would be silly to believe them."

These two viewpoints represent the two extremes of belief, and we all fall somewhere on the spectrum from one to another. I know a number of good, faithful people who fall on differing sides of the spectrum. So I'm not necessarily here to tell you that one way of believing is better than the other, I'm here to tell you what I think is the good news! No matter where you fall on that spectrum, it's okay. You can still be a faithful Christian and have different understandings about these kinds of Biblical stories.

So what are the ways we can approach the stories in today's text? I've found a variety of valid responses. Let's start with the first story about the feeding of the five thousand. I've heard three compelling ways of understanding this story. The first is the most straightforward, and is the basic way we explain the story to our children. Simply taking it at its face value, we could allow that Jesus truly did perform a miracle with those five loaves and two fishes and fed five thousand people to their fill, with twelve baskets of food left over.

If we're a little skeptical about the miraculous, there's a second way we could understand the story. This second way is a bit more theological. According to the scripture, "Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated."² Sound familiar? Sound like what we remember each time we have

² John 6:11a

communion? Maybe this was a sacramental meal, much like what we experience in Holy Communion. Maybe the way the five loaves and two fishes fed everyone was that each person took just a small piece, like we do with communion. The story says that they each had their fill. Maybe it was a different kind of appetite that was filled through this meal. Maybe their deep hunger to be fulfilled was satisfied in the way that only Jesus Christ can. I like this way of thinking about it.

William Barclay beautifully describes a third option. It's one that I had heard before, but I really like the way he puts it. He says, "There may be another and very lovely explanation. It is scarcely to be thought that the crowd left on a nine-mile expedition without making any preparations at all. If there were pilgrims with them, they would certainly possess supplies for the way. But it may be that they would not produce what they had, for they selfishly – and very humanly – wished to keep it all for themselves. It may then be that Jesus, with that rare smile of his, produced the little store that he and his disciples had; with sunny faith he thanked God for it and shared it out. Moved by his example, everyone who had anything did the same; and in the end there was enough, and more than enough, for all.

Barclay continues, "It may be that this is a miracle in which the presence of Jesus turned a crowd of selfish men and women into a fellowship of sharers. It may be that this story represents the biggest miracle of all – one which changed not loaves and fishes, but men and women."³ What a beautiful way of understanding the story.

I've experienced this kind of miracle. I'm able to experience it over and over again, every time I serve at the United Methodist Free Store. I've only worked at the one on the west side, so I can only speak from those experiences. They have a room in the back of the store that is about twenty feet by twenty feet square. In the room is a pile of bags filled with clothing. I call the pile the "Mount of Abundance." I've never been there when the pile was not taller than I am. Whenever I have worked there, my job has always been to open up the bags, sort the clothes, and put them on hangers to be given away in the front of the store.

Each time I work at the store, the pile never seems to go down. I'm the kind of guy who loves to get a job done, so I would love to get all the bags emptied, sorted and hung, so I could see a nice clean floor. I've never seen that happen. You see, while we're emptying and sorting bags and hanging clothes, there are people dropping off more bags of clothes. The pile seems like it never goes down. I clearly remember the time I was working the pile and I realized that what I was feeling must have been similar to what the disciples experienced while feeding the five thousand. The baskets never really got empty, and the pile of clothes never went down, as long as people continued to share what they had.

Well, that's the first miracle story in today's text. The other is my old favorite about Jesus walking on the water. As the story goes, Jesus had gone away by himself. When evening came, the disciples went down to the sea, got in a boat, and headed across the sea

³ Barclay, William. "The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of John, Volume One." Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. P. 238.

in the dark toward Capernaum. The sea became rough and the wind was blowing. The disciples had rowed three or four miles when they saw Jesus walking on the water near the boat. They were afraid, but Jesus said, "It is I, do not be afraid." The disciples wanted him to get in the boat with them, but immediately they were at the shore where they were headed.

The way we have understood this story from our childhood is to picture Jesus, calmly walking on top of the water toward the boat. We can certainly say that Jesus, as the son of God, was able to walk on the water and zip the boat to the shore when the disciples asked him to get in. This understanding speaks of the incredible power of God available through Jesus, and that when the going gets tough, Jesus will be there for us in miraculous ways.

If you can't go with the miraculous explanation, there is another way to understand the story. The Greek preposition "epi" that we translate as "on" when we speak of Jesus walking "on" the water can have a number of different meanings, including on, upon; over; at, by; before, in the presence of; when, under, at the time of. So it is possible that the original Greek meaning was not that Jesus was walking "on" the water, but that Jesus was walking "near" the water, "by" the water, or even "under" the water.

Additionally, the distance of the trip is helpful to know. The disciples started out at Bethsaida, and were travelling to Capernaum. It's about four miles across the sea from Bethsaida to Capernaum. So, when the scripture says that the disciples had already rowed three to four miles, and that their boat immediately reached shore, it is possible that Jesus was following them along the shoreline and they didn't know it. By the time they met up with Jesus, they were almost to the end of the trip, which explains how they "immediately" reached their destination. This understanding might tell us that Jesus is watching us as we go along, letting us struggle on our own, but coming to us when we really need him, giving us the encouragement that we need for that last, most tiring leg of the journey.

You see, I believe that the truth of the scriptures is best found when we are able to hold on to the truth available in all the different ways to understand the scriptures rather than holding one interpretation and discarding all the rest. Take, for instance, today's story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. How much more meaningful can that story be when we allow it to help us understand the miraculous power of Jesus, along with the sacramental nature of the scene as well as the sharing of resources that Jesus initiates. Through the story of Jesus walking on water, we can understand that Jesus can come to us in miraculous and powerful ways when we need him, and we can also understand that Jesus is present all along the way, coming to us when we need him most to get us through the really tough parts, but letting us figure things out on our own most of the way. Any one interpretation is valid, but when you add the various interpretations together, you get something much more beautiful and meaningful.

I think the call to Christian discipleship from this morning's text is to look for the other interpretations of scripture that can make our faith more robust. If you're solidly on

either end of the spectrum, maybe it's time to open up to the other possibilities. If you've sworn off all belief in miracles, maybe it's time to consider that the miraculous isn't necessarily impossible. If you are still holding on to the children's version of the story, maybe it's time to consider some other ways to understand the story. As we do, I believe the stories of our faith will become more meaningful, and will truly have the power to transform our lives. May we be a people who are open enough to allow that to happen.

“Miracles and Unbelief”

John 6:1-21

Rev. Jeff Allen

July 26, 2009

When I was a young boy, I always had a fascination with magic. Now this was way before Harry Potter, so it wasn't wizardry that I was connecting with, it was more about magicians. You know...card tricks, levitation, disappearing acts, sawing pretty ladies in half. I would beg my mom to take me to see David Copperfield or Blackstone when they were in town. Back when they still had magic shops, I just had to go whenever I could, and I couldn't leave the shop without buying some new trick or a special deck of cards that would allow me to amaze my friends and family.

It may not come as a surprise then to find out that the miracle stories of Jesus that are told in this morning's Gospel text have always been my favorite. Such amazing and magical acts Jesus was able to do. I loved those stories from an early age, and I actually have proof of it.

My grandmother, Granny Foy, was the spiritual rock of our family. I cannot remember a time when I visited her that she didn't have a Bible near her chair. As her eyes failed, we would buy her larger and larger print Bibles and magnifying glasses. As her strength failed, she would tear the Bible into its separate books so they would be light enough to hold while she read.

Granny loved to tell me the stories of Jesus all the time when I was a little boy, and I loved to sit on her lap and listen. She gave me this little red Bible on July 1, 1978 – I was four and a half years old at the time. In it, she had underlined my favorite stories, and on the inside front cover, she made a note to tell me what page those stories were on so that I could find them faster. At the top of the list: “Page 192 – Jesus walked on the water.” I remember using her note many times to find that story.

In the imagination of my childhood, Jesus could do amazing and powerful things. He was full of mystery and surprise – just like David Copperfield or Blackstone. Now I knew, as a child, that magic tricks were simply that – tricks. And I knew that Jesus wasn't simply a magician. Jesus was something special. His miracles were real, and they displayed the power of God.

As a grown up (well most of the time), what am I to do with these miracle stories of Jesus? I'm reminded of that verse toward the end of 1 Corinthians 13. It's one that doesn't get read as much at weddings. You know, the verse where Paul writes, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.”¹ And so I wonder, are the miracles of Jesus and other amazing things that happen in the Bible simply childhood fantasies that need to be discarded now that I'm an adult? I have to admit that I'm torn about the answer to that question.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:11

What I do know is that these miracle stories are the kind of stories that cause many adults to stray away from religion. We tell stories like this all the time to children, and it's important that we do. But often we stop with the children's version. I think the church fails when it does not encourage people to engage the scriptures at a level that is appropriate for their age. I think that there are far too many adults who have never been encouraged to move beyond a child-like faith, or given opportunities to do so. And that's when faith begins to break down for many folks.

Can Jesus take five loaves and two fishes and feed five thousand people? Can Jesus really walk on water? Can Jonah really get swallowed by a whale and live to tell the tale? Can someone who has died really come back to life?

If you're asking these questions to a child, the answer is more likely to be, "Sure! Of course! Why not?" If animals can talk, and monsters can sing and dance and teach the alphabet, if teddy bears can have birthday parties, then why can't all those things in the Bible also be true?

Now ask those same questions to an adult, and you may get a variety of answers. On the one side, some might say, "Of course all those things can be true. How can we place a limit on the power of God? God can do anything God wants to do." On the other side, others might respond with, "You know, I just can't go there with you. If you're asking me to believe all these miracles and other things, I just can't. There's no way. Those stories defy the laws of nature, and anyone with a reasonable mind would be silly to believe them."

These two viewpoints represent the two extremes of belief, and we all fall somewhere on the spectrum from one to another. I know a number of good, faithful people who fall on differing sides of the spectrum. So I'm not necessarily here to tell you that one way of believing is better than the other, I'm here to tell you what I think is the good news! No matter where you fall on that spectrum, it's okay. You can still be a faithful Christian and have different understandings about these kinds of Biblical stories.

So what are the ways we can approach the stories in today's text? I've found a variety of valid responses. Let's start with the first story about the feeding of the five thousand. I've heard three compelling ways of understanding this story. The first is the most straightforward, and is the basic way we explain the story to our children. Simply taking it at its face value, we could allow that Jesus truly did perform a miracle with those five loaves and two fishes and fed five thousand people to their fill, with twelve baskets of food left over.

If we're a little skeptical about the miraculous, there's a second way we could understand the story. This second way is a bit more theological. According to the scripture, "Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated."² Sound familiar? Sound like what we remember each time we have

² John 6:11a

communion? Maybe this was a sacramental meal, much like what we experience in Holy Communion. Maybe the way the five loaves and two fishes fed everyone was that each person took just a small piece, like we do with communion. The story says that they each had their fill. Maybe it was a different kind of appetite that was filled through this meal. Maybe their deep hunger to be fulfilled was satisfied in the way that only Jesus Christ can. I like this way of thinking about it.

William Barclay beautifully describes a third option. It's one that I had heard before, but I really like the way he puts it. He says, "There may be another and very lovely explanation. It is scarcely to be thought that the crowd left on a nine-mile expedition without making any preparations at all. If there were pilgrims with them, they would certainly possess supplies for the way. But it may be that they would not produce what they had, for they selfishly – and very humanly – wished to keep it all for themselves. It may then be that Jesus, with that rare smile of his, produced the little store that he and his disciples had; with sunny faith he thanked God for it and shared it out. Moved by his example, everyone who had anything did the same; and in the end there was enough, and more than enough, for all.

Barclay continues, "It may be that this is a miracle in which the presence of Jesus turned a crowd of selfish men and women into a fellowship of sharers. It may be that this story represents the biggest miracle of all – one which changed not loaves and fishes, but men and women."³ What a beautiful way of understanding the story.

I've experienced this kind of miracle. I'm able to experience it over and over again, every time I serve at the United Methodist Free Store. I've only worked at the one on the west side, so I can only speak from those experiences. They have a room in the back of the store that is about twenty feet by twenty feet square. In the room is a pile of bags filled with clothing. I call the pile the "Mount of Abundance." I've never been there when the pile was not taller than I am. Whenever I have worked there, my job has always been to open up the bags, sort the clothes, and put them on hangers to be given away in the front of the store.

Each time I work at the store, the pile never seems to go down. I'm the kind of guy who loves to get a job done, so I would love to get all the bags emptied, sorted and hung, so I could see a nice clean floor. I've never seen that happen. You see, while we're emptying and sorting bags and hanging clothes, there are people dropping off more bags of clothes. The pile seems like it never goes down. I clearly remember the time I was working the pile and I realized that what I was feeling must have been similar to what the disciples experienced while feeding the five thousand. The baskets never really got empty, and the pile of clothes never went down, as long as people continued to share what they had.

Well, that's the first miracle story in today's text. The other is my old favorite about Jesus walking on the water. As the story goes, Jesus had gone away by himself. When evening came, the disciples went down to the sea, got in a boat, and headed across the sea

³ Barclay, William. "The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of John, Volume One." Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. P. 238.

in the dark toward Capernaum. The sea became rough and the wind was blowing. The disciples had rowed three or four miles when they saw Jesus walking on the water near the boat. They were afraid, but Jesus said, "It is I, do not be afraid." The disciples wanted him to get in the boat with them, but immediately they were at the shore where they were headed.

The way we have understood this story from our childhood is to picture Jesus, calmly walking on top of the water toward the boat. We can certainly say that Jesus, as the son of God, was able to walk on the water and zip the boat to the shore when the disciples asked him to get in. This understanding speaks of the incredible power of God available through Jesus, and that when the going gets tough, Jesus will be there for us in miraculous ways.

If you can't go with the miraculous explanation, there is another way to understand the story. The Greek preposition "epi" that we translate as "on" when we speak of Jesus walking "on" the water can have a number of different meanings, including on, upon; over; at, by; before, in the presence of; when, under, at the time of. So it is possible that the original Greek meaning was not that Jesus was walking "on" the water, but that Jesus was walking "near" the water, "by" the water, or even "under" the water.

Additionally, the distance of the trip is helpful to know. The disciples started out at Bethsaida, and were travelling to Capernaum. It's about four miles across the sea from Bethsaida to Capernaum. So, when the scripture says that the disciples had already rowed three to four miles, and that their boat immediately reached shore, it is possible that Jesus was following them along the shoreline and they didn't know it. By the time they met up with Jesus, they were almost to the end of the trip, which explains how they "immediately" reached their destination. This understanding might tell us that Jesus is watching us as we go along, letting us struggle on our own, but coming to us when we really need him, giving us the encouragement that we need for that last, most tiring leg of the journey.

You see, I believe that the truth of the scriptures is best found when we are able to hold on to the truth available in all the different ways to understand the scriptures rather than holding one interpretation and discarding all the rest. Take, for instance, today's story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. How much more meaningful can that story be when we allow it to help us understand the miraculous power of Jesus, along with the sacramental nature of the scene as well as the sharing of resources that Jesus initiates. Through the story of Jesus walking on water, we can understand that Jesus can come to us in miraculous and powerful ways when we need him, and we can also understand that Jesus is present all along the way, coming to us when we need him most to get us through the really tough parts, but letting us figure things out on our own most of the way. Any one interpretation is valid, but when you add the various interpretations together, you get something much more beautiful and meaningful.

I think the call to Christian discipleship from this morning's text is to look for the other interpretations of scripture that can make our faith more robust. If you're solidly on

either end of the spectrum, maybe it's time to open up to the other possibilities. If you've sworn off all belief in miracles, maybe it's time to consider that the miraculous isn't necessarily impossible. If you are still holding on to the children's version of the story, maybe it's time to consider some other ways to understand the story. As we do, I believe the stories of our faith will become more meaningful, and will truly have the power to transform our lives. May we be a people who are open enough to allow that to happen.

“Miracles and Unbelief”

John 6:1-21

Rev. Jeff Allen

July 26, 2009

When I was a young boy, I always had a fascination with magic. Now this was way before Harry Potter, so it wasn't wizardry that I was connecting with, it was more about magicians. You know...card tricks, levitation, disappearing acts, sawing pretty ladies in half. I would beg my mom to take me to see David Copperfield or Blackstone when they were in town. Back when they still had magic shops, I just had to go whenever I could, and I couldn't leave the shop without buying some new trick or a special deck of cards that would allow me to amaze my friends and family.

It may not come as a surprise then to find out that the miracle stories of Jesus that are told in this morning's Gospel text have always been my favorite. Such amazing and magical acts Jesus was able to do. I loved those stories from an early age, and I actually have proof of it.

My grandmother, Granny Foy, was the spiritual rock of our family. I cannot remember a time when I visited her that she didn't have a Bible near her chair. As her eyes failed, we would buy her larger and larger print Bibles and magnifying glasses. As her strength failed, she would tear the Bible into its separate books so they would be light enough to hold while she read.

Granny loved to tell me the stories of Jesus all the time when I was a little boy, and I loved to sit on her lap and listen. She gave me this little red Bible on July 1, 1978 – I was four and a half years old at the time. In it, she had underlined my favorite stories, and on the inside front cover, she made a note to tell me what page those stories were on so that I could find them faster. At the top of the list: “Page 192 – Jesus walked on the water.” I remember using her note many times to find that story.

In the imagination of my childhood, Jesus could do amazing and powerful things. He was full of mystery and surprise – just like David Copperfield or Blackstone. Now I knew, as a child, that magic tricks were simply that – tricks. And I knew that Jesus wasn't simply a magician. Jesus was something special. His miracles were real, and they displayed the power of God.

As a grown up (well most of the time), what am I to do with these miracle stories of Jesus? I'm reminded of that verse toward the end of 1 Corinthians 13. It's one that doesn't get read as much at weddings. You know, the verse where Paul writes, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.”¹ And so I wonder, are the miracles of Jesus and other amazing things that happen in the Bible simply childhood fantasies that need to be discarded now that I'm an adult? I have to admit that I'm torn about the answer to that question.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:11

What I do know is that these miracle stories are the kind of stories that cause many adults to stray away from religion. We tell stories like this all the time to children, and it's important that we do. But often we stop with the children's version. I think the church fails when it does not encourage people to engage the scriptures at a level that is appropriate for their age. I think that there are far too many adults who have never been encouraged to move beyond a child-like faith, or given opportunities to do so. And that's when faith begins to break down for many folks.

Can Jesus take five loaves and two fishes and feed five thousand people? Can Jesus really walk on water? Can Jonah really get swallowed by a whale and live to tell the tale? Can someone who has died really come back to life?

If you're asking these questions to a child, the answer is more likely to be, "Sure! Of course! Why not?" If animals can talk, and monsters can sing and dance and teach the alphabet, if teddy bears can have birthday parties, then why can't all those things in the Bible also be true?

Now ask those same questions to an adult, and you may get a variety of answers. On the one side, some might say, "Of course all those things can be true. How can we place a limit on the power of God? God can do anything God wants to do." On the other side, others might respond with, "You know, I just can't go there with you. If you're asking me to believe all these miracles and other things, I just can't. There's no way. Those stories defy the laws of nature, and anyone with a reasonable mind would be silly to believe them."

These two viewpoints represent the two extremes of belief, and we all fall somewhere on the spectrum from one to another. I know a number of good, faithful people who fall on differing sides of the spectrum. So I'm not necessarily here to tell you that one way of believing is better than the other, I'm here to tell you what I think is the good news! No matter where you fall on that spectrum, it's okay. You can still be a faithful Christian and have different understandings about these kinds of Biblical stories.

So what are the ways we can approach the stories in today's text? I've found a variety of valid responses. Let's start with the first story about the feeding of the five thousand. I've heard three compelling ways of understanding this story. The first is the most straightforward, and is the basic way we explain the story to our children. Simply taking it at its face value, we could allow that Jesus truly did perform a miracle with those five loaves and two fishes and fed five thousand people to their fill, with twelve baskets of food left over.

If we're a little skeptical about the miraculous, there's a second way we could understand the story. This second way is a bit more theological. According to the scripture, "Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated."² Sound familiar? Sound like what we remember each time we have

² John 6:11a

communion? Maybe this was a sacramental meal, much like what we experience in Holy Communion. Maybe the way the five loaves and two fishes fed everyone was that each person took just a small piece, like we do with communion. The story says that they each had their fill. Maybe it was a different kind of appetite that was filled through this meal. Maybe their deep hunger to be fulfilled was satisfied in the way that only Jesus Christ can. I like this way of thinking about it.

William Barclay beautifully describes a third option. It's one that I had heard before, but I really like the way he puts it. He says, "There may be another and very lovely explanation. It is scarcely to be thought that the crowd left on a nine-mile expedition without making any preparations at all. If there were pilgrims with them, they would certainly possess supplies for the way. But it may be that they would not produce what they had, for they selfishly – and very humanly – wished to keep it all for themselves. It may then be that Jesus, with that rare smile of his, produced the little store that he and his disciples had; with sunny faith he thanked God for it and shared it out. Moved by his example, everyone who had anything did the same; and in the end there was enough, and more than enough, for all.

Barclay continues, "It may be that this is a miracle in which the presence of Jesus turned a crowd of selfish men and women into a fellowship of sharers. It may be that this story represents the biggest miracle of all – one which changed not loaves and fishes, but men and women."³ What a beautiful way of understanding the story.

I've experienced this kind of miracle. I'm able to experience it over and over again, every time I serve at the United Methodist Free Store. I've only worked at the one on the west side, so I can only speak from those experiences. They have a room in the back of the store that is about twenty feet by twenty feet square. In the room is a pile of bags filled with clothing. I call the pile the "Mount of Abundance." I've never been there when the pile was not taller than I am. Whenever I have worked there, my job has always been to open up the bags, sort the clothes, and put them on hangers to be given away in the front of the store.

Each time I work at the store, the pile never seems to go down. I'm the kind of guy who loves to get a job done, so I would love to get all the bags emptied, sorted and hung, so I could see a nice clean floor. I've never seen that happen. You see, while we're emptying and sorting bags and hanging clothes, there are people dropping off more bags of clothes. The pile seems like it never goes down. I clearly remember the time I was working the pile and I realized that what I was feeling must have been similar to what the disciples experienced while feeding the five thousand. The baskets never really got empty, and the pile of clothes never went down, as long as people continued to share what they had.

Well, that's the first miracle story in today's text. The other is my old favorite about Jesus walking on the water. As the story goes, Jesus had gone away by himself. When evening came, the disciples went down to the sea, got in a boat, and headed across the sea

³ Barclay, William. "The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of John, Volume One." Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. P. 238.

in the dark toward Capernaum. The sea became rough and the wind was blowing. The disciples had rowed three or four miles when they saw Jesus walking on the water near the boat. They were afraid, but Jesus said, "It is I, do not be afraid." The disciples wanted him to get in the boat with them, but immediately they were at the shore where they were headed.

The way we have understood this story from our childhood is to picture Jesus, calmly walking on top of the water toward the boat. We can certainly say that Jesus, as the son of God, was able to walk on the water and zip the boat to the shore when the disciples asked him to get in. This understanding speaks of the incredible power of God available through Jesus, and that when the going gets tough, Jesus will be there for us in miraculous ways.

If you can't go with the miraculous explanation, there is another way to understand the story. The Greek preposition "epi" that we translate as "on" when we speak of Jesus walking "on" the water can have a number of different meanings, including on, upon; over; at, by; before, in the presence of; when, under, at the time of. So it is possible that the original Greek meaning was not that Jesus was walking "on" the water, but that Jesus was walking "near" the water, "by" the water, or even "under" the water.

Additionally, the distance of the trip is helpful to know. The disciples started out at Bethsaida, and were travelling to Capernaum. It's about four miles across the sea from Bethsaida to Capernaum. So, when the scripture says that the disciples had already rowed three to four miles, and that their boat immediately reached shore, it is possible that Jesus was following them along the shoreline and they didn't know it. By the time they met up with Jesus, they were almost to the end of the trip, which explains how they "immediately" reached their destination. This understanding might tell us that Jesus is watching us as we go along, letting us struggle on our own, but coming to us when we really need him, giving us the encouragement that we need for that last, most tiring leg of the journey.

You see, I believe that the truth of the scriptures is best found when we are able to hold on to the truth available in all the different ways to understand the scriptures rather than holding one interpretation and discarding all the rest. Take, for instance, today's story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. How much more meaningful can that story be when we allow it to help us understand the miraculous power of Jesus, along with the sacramental nature of the scene as well as the sharing of resources that Jesus initiates. Through the story of Jesus walking on water, we can understand that Jesus can come to us in miraculous and powerful ways when we need him, and we can also understand that Jesus is present all along the way, coming to us when we need him most to get us through the really tough parts, but letting us figure things out on our own most of the way. Any one interpretation is valid, but when you add the various interpretations together, you get something much more beautiful and meaningful.

I think the call to Christian discipleship from this morning's text is to look for the other interpretations of scripture that can make our faith more robust. If you're solidly on

either end of the spectrum, maybe it's time to open up to the other possibilities. If you've sworn off all belief in miracles, maybe it's time to consider that the miraculous isn't necessarily impossible. If you are still holding on to the children's version of the story, maybe it's time to consider some other ways to understand the story. As we do, I believe the stories of our faith will become more meaningful, and will truly have the power to transform our lives. May we be a people who are open enough to allow that to happen.

“Miracles and Unbelief”

John 6:1-21

Rev. Jeff Allen

July 26, 2009

When I was a young boy, I always had a fascination with magic. Now this was way before Harry Potter, so it wasn't wizardry that I was connecting with, it was more about magicians. You know...card tricks, levitation, disappearing acts, sawing pretty ladies in half. I would beg my mom to take me to see David Copperfield or Blackstone when they were in town. Back when they still had magic shops, I just had to go whenever I could, and I couldn't leave the shop without buying some new trick or a special deck of cards that would allow me to amaze my friends and family.

It may not come as a surprise then to find out that the miracle stories of Jesus that are told in this morning's Gospel text have always been my favorite. Such amazing and magical acts Jesus was able to do. I loved those stories from an early age, and I actually have proof of it.

My grandmother, Granny Foy, was the spiritual rock of our family. I cannot remember a time when I visited her that she didn't have a Bible near her chair. As her eyes failed, we would buy her larger and larger print Bibles and magnifying glasses. As her strength failed, she would tear the Bible into its separate books so they would be light enough to hold while she read.

Granny loved to tell me the stories of Jesus all the time when I was a little boy, and I loved to sit on her lap and listen. She gave me this little red Bible on July 1, 1978 – I was four and a half years old at the time. In it, she had underlined my favorite stories, and on the inside front cover, she made a note to tell me what page those stories were on so that I could find them faster. At the top of the list: “Page 192 – Jesus walked on the water.” I remember using her note many times to find that story.

In the imagination of my childhood, Jesus could do amazing and powerful things. He was full of mystery and surprise – just like David Copperfield or Blackstone. Now I knew, as a child, that magic tricks were simply that – tricks. And I knew that Jesus wasn't simply a magician. Jesus was something special. His miracles were real, and they displayed the power of God.

As a grown up (well most of the time), what am I to do with these miracle stories of Jesus? I'm reminded of that verse toward the end of 1 Corinthians 13. It's one that doesn't get read as much at weddings. You know, the verse where Paul writes, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.”¹ And so I wonder, are the miracles of Jesus and other amazing things that happen in the Bible simply childhood fantasies that need to be discarded now that I'm an adult? I have to admit that I'm torn about the answer to that question.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:11

What I do know is that these miracle stories are the kind of stories that cause many adults to stray away from religion. We tell stories like this all the time to children, and it's important that we do. But often we stop with the children's version. I think the church fails when it does not encourage people to engage the scriptures at a level that is appropriate for their age. I think that there are far too many adults who have never been encouraged to move beyond a child-like faith, or given opportunities to do so. And that's when faith begins to break down for many folks.

Can Jesus take five loaves and two fishes and feed five thousand people? Can Jesus really walk on water? Can Jonah really get swallowed by a whale and live to tell the tale? Can someone who has died really come back to life?

If you're asking these questions to a child, the answer is more likely to be, "Sure! Of course! Why not?" If animals can talk, and monsters can sing and dance and teach the alphabet, if teddy bears can have birthday parties, then why can't all those things in the Bible also be true?

Now ask those same questions to an adult, and you may get a variety of answers. On the one side, some might say, "Of course all those things can be true. How can we place a limit on the power of God? God can do anything God wants to do." On the other side, others might respond with, "You know, I just can't go there with you. If you're asking me to believe all these miracles and other things, I just can't. There's no way. Those stories defy the laws of nature, and anyone with a reasonable mind would be silly to believe them."

These two viewpoints represent the two extremes of belief, and we all fall somewhere on the spectrum from one to another. I know a number of good, faithful people who fall on differing sides of the spectrum. So I'm not necessarily here to tell you that one way of believing is better than the other, I'm here to tell you what I think is the good news! No matter where you fall on that spectrum, it's okay. You can still be a faithful Christian and have different understandings about these kinds of Biblical stories.

So what are the ways we can approach the stories in today's text? I've found a variety of valid responses. Let's start with the first story about the feeding of the five thousand. I've heard three compelling ways of understanding this story. The first is the most straightforward, and is the basic way we explain the story to our children. Simply taking it at its face value, we could allow that Jesus truly did perform a miracle with those five loaves and two fishes and fed five thousand people to their fill, with twelve baskets of food left over.

If we're a little skeptical about the miraculous, there's a second way we could understand the story. This second way is a bit more theological. According to the scripture, "Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated."² Sound familiar? Sound like what we remember each time we have

² John 6:11a

communion? Maybe this was a sacramental meal, much like what we experience in Holy Communion. Maybe the way the five loaves and two fishes fed everyone was that each person took just a small piece, like we do with communion. The story says that they each had their fill. Maybe it was a different kind of appetite that was filled through this meal. Maybe their deep hunger to be fulfilled was satisfied in the way that only Jesus Christ can. I like this way of thinking about it.

William Barclay beautifully describes a third option. It's one that I had heard before, but I really like the way he puts it. He says, "There may be another and very lovely explanation. It is scarcely to be thought that the crowd left on a nine-mile expedition without making any preparations at all. If there were pilgrims with them, they would certainly possess supplies for the way. But it may be that they would not produce what they had, for they selfishly – and very humanly – wished to keep it all for themselves. It may then be that Jesus, with that rare smile of his, produced the little store that he and his disciples had; with sunny faith he thanked God for it and shared it out. Moved by his example, everyone who had anything did the same; and in the end there was enough, and more than enough, for all.

Barclay continues, "It may be that this is a miracle in which the presence of Jesus turned a crowd of selfish men and women into a fellowship of sharers. It may be that this story represents the biggest miracle of all – one which changed not loaves and fishes, but men and women."³ What a beautiful way of understanding the story.

I've experienced this kind of miracle. I'm able to experience it over and over again, every time I serve at the United Methodist Free Store. I've only worked at the one on the west side, so I can only speak from those experiences. They have a room in the back of the store that is about twenty feet by twenty feet square. In the room is a pile of bags filled with clothing. I call the pile the "Mount of Abundance." I've never been there when the pile was not taller than I am. Whenever I have worked there, my job has always been to open up the bags, sort the clothes, and put them on hangers to be given away in the front of the store.

Each time I work at the store, the pile never seems to go down. I'm the kind of guy who loves to get a job done, so I would love to get all the bags emptied, sorted and hung, so I could see a nice clean floor. I've never seen that happen. You see, while we're emptying and sorting bags and hanging clothes, there are people dropping off more bags of clothes. The pile seems like it never goes down. I clearly remember the time I was working the pile and I realized that what I was feeling must have been similar to what the disciples experienced while feeding the five thousand. The baskets never really got empty, and the pile of clothes never went down, as long as people continued to share what they had.

Well, that's the first miracle story in today's text. The other is my old favorite about Jesus walking on the water. As the story goes, Jesus had gone away by himself. When evening came, the disciples went down to the sea, got in a boat, and headed across the sea

³ Barclay, William. "The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of John, Volume One." Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. P. 238.

in the dark toward Capernaum. The sea became rough and the wind was blowing. The disciples had rowed three or four miles when they saw Jesus walking on the water near the boat. They were afraid, but Jesus said, "It is I, do not be afraid." The disciples wanted him to get in the boat with them, but immediately they were at the shore where they were headed.

The way we have understood this story from our childhood is to picture Jesus, calmly walking on top of the water toward the boat. We can certainly say that Jesus, as the son of God, was able to walk on the water and zip the boat to the shore when the disciples asked him to get in. This understanding speaks of the incredible power of God available through Jesus, and that when the going gets tough, Jesus will be there for us in miraculous ways.

If you can't go with the miraculous explanation, there is another way to understand the story. The Greek preposition "epi" that we translate as "on" when we speak of Jesus walking "on" the water can have a number of different meanings, including on, upon; over; at, by; before, in the presence of; when, under, at the time of. So it is possible that the original Greek meaning was not that Jesus was walking "on" the water, but that Jesus was walking "near" the water, "by" the water, or even "under" the water.

Additionally, the distance of the trip is helpful to know. The disciples started out at Bethsaida, and were travelling to Capernaum. It's about four miles across the sea from Bethsaida to Capernaum. So, when the scripture says that the disciples had already rowed three to four miles, and that their boat immediately reached shore, it is possible that Jesus was following them along the shoreline and they didn't know it. By the time they met up with Jesus, they were almost to the end of the trip, which explains how they "immediately" reached their destination. This understanding might tell us that Jesus is watching us as we go along, letting us struggle on our own, but coming to us when we really need him, giving us the encouragement that we need for that last, most tiring leg of the journey.

You see, I believe that the truth of the scriptures is best found when we are able to hold on to the truth available in all the different ways to understand the scriptures rather than holding one interpretation and discarding all the rest. Take, for instance, today's story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. How much more meaningful can that story be when we allow it to help us understand the miraculous power of Jesus, along with the sacramental nature of the scene as well as the sharing of resources that Jesus initiates. Through the story of Jesus walking on water, we can understand that Jesus can come to us in miraculous and powerful ways when we need him, and we can also understand that Jesus is present all along the way, coming to us when we need him most to get us through the really tough parts, but letting us figure things out on our own most of the way. Any one interpretation is valid, but when you add the various interpretations together, you get something much more beautiful and meaningful.

I think the call to Christian discipleship from this morning's text is to look for the other interpretations of scripture that can make our faith more robust. If you're solidly on

either end of the spectrum, maybe it's time to open up to the other possibilities. If you've sworn off all belief in miracles, maybe it's time to consider that the miraculous isn't necessarily impossible. If you are still holding on to the children's version of the story, maybe it's time to consider some other ways to understand the story. As we do, I believe the stories of our faith will become more meaningful, and will truly have the power to transform our lives. May we be a people who are open enough to allow that to happen.

“Miracles and Unbelief”

John 6:1-21

Rev. Jeff Allen

July 26, 2009

When I was a young boy, I always had a fascination with magic. Now this was way before Harry Potter, so it wasn't wizardry that I was connecting with, it was more about magicians. You know...card tricks, levitation, disappearing acts, sawing pretty ladies in half. I would beg my mom to take me to see David Copperfield or Blackstone when they were in town. Back when they still had magic shops, I just had to go whenever I could, and I couldn't leave the shop without buying some new trick or a special deck of cards that would allow me to amaze my friends and family.

It may not come as a surprise then to find out that the miracle stories of Jesus that are told in this morning's Gospel text have always been my favorite. Such amazing and magical acts Jesus was able to do. I loved those stories from an early age, and I actually have proof of it.

My grandmother, Granny Foy, was the spiritual rock of our family. I cannot remember a time when I visited her that she didn't have a Bible near her chair. As her eyes failed, we would buy her larger and larger print Bibles and magnifying glasses. As her strength failed, she would tear the Bible into its separate books so they would be light enough to hold while she read.

Granny loved to tell me the stories of Jesus all the time when I was a little boy, and I loved to sit on her lap and listen. She gave me this little red Bible on July 1, 1978 – I was four and a half years old at the time. In it, she had underlined my favorite stories, and on the inside front cover, she made a note to tell me what page those stories were on so that I could find them faster. At the top of the list: “Page 192 – Jesus walked on the water.” I remember using her note many times to find that story.

In the imagination of my childhood, Jesus could do amazing and powerful things. He was full of mystery and surprise – just like David Copperfield or Blackstone. Now I knew, as a child, that magic tricks were simply that – tricks. And I knew that Jesus wasn't simply a magician. Jesus was something special. His miracles were real, and they displayed the power of God.

As a grown up (well most of the time), what am I to do with these miracle stories of Jesus? I'm reminded of that verse toward the end of 1 Corinthians 13. It's one that doesn't get read as much at weddings. You know, the verse where Paul writes, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.”¹ And so I wonder, are the miracles of Jesus and other amazing things that happen in the Bible simply childhood fantasies that need to be discarded now that I'm an adult? I have to admit that I'm torn about the answer to that question.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:11

What I do know is that these miracle stories are the kind of stories that cause many adults to stray away from religion. We tell stories like this all the time to children, and it's important that we do. But often we stop with the children's version. I think the church fails when it does not encourage people to engage the scriptures at a level that is appropriate for their age. I think that there are far too many adults who have never been encouraged to move beyond a child-like faith, or given opportunities to do so. And that's when faith begins to break down for many folks.

Can Jesus take five loaves and two fishes and feed five thousand people? Can Jesus really walk on water? Can Jonah really get swallowed by a whale and live to tell the tale? Can someone who has died really come back to life?

If you're asking these questions to a child, the answer is more likely to be, "Sure! Of course! Why not?" If animals can talk, and monsters can sing and dance and teach the alphabet, if teddy bears can have birthday parties, then why can't all those things in the Bible also be true?

Now ask those same questions to an adult, and you may get a variety of answers. On the one side, some might say, "Of course all those things can be true. How can we place a limit on the power of God? God can do anything God wants to do." On the other side, others might respond with, "You know, I just can't go there with you. If you're asking me to believe all these miracles and other things, I just can't. There's no way. Those stories defy the laws of nature, and anyone with a reasonable mind would be silly to believe them."

These two viewpoints represent the two extremes of belief, and we all fall somewhere on the spectrum from one to another. I know a number of good, faithful people who fall on differing sides of the spectrum. So I'm not necessarily here to tell you that one way of believing is better than the other, I'm here to tell you what I think is the good news! No matter where you fall on that spectrum, it's okay. You can still be a faithful Christian and have different understandings about these kinds of Biblical stories.

So what are the ways we can approach the stories in today's text? I've found a variety of valid responses. Let's start with the first story about the feeding of the five thousand. I've heard three compelling ways of understanding this story. The first is the most straightforward, and is the basic way we explain the story to our children. Simply taking it at its face value, we could allow that Jesus truly did perform a miracle with those five loaves and two fishes and fed five thousand people to their fill, with twelve baskets of food left over.

If we're a little skeptical about the miraculous, there's a second way we could understand the story. This second way is a bit more theological. According to the scripture, "Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated."² Sound familiar? Sound like what we remember each time we have

² John 6:11a

communion? Maybe this was a sacramental meal, much like what we experience in Holy Communion. Maybe the way the five loaves and two fishes fed everyone was that each person took just a small piece, like we do with communion. The story says that they each had their fill. Maybe it was a different kind of appetite that was filled through this meal. Maybe their deep hunger to be fulfilled was satisfied in the way that only Jesus Christ can. I like this way of thinking about it.

William Barclay beautifully describes a third option. It's one that I had heard before, but I really like the way he puts it. He says, "There may be another and very lovely explanation. It is scarcely to be thought that the crowd left on a nine-mile expedition without making any preparations at all. If there were pilgrims with them, they would certainly possess supplies for the way. But it may be that they would not produce what they had, for they selfishly – and very humanly – wished to keep it all for themselves. It may then be that Jesus, with that rare smile of his, produced the little store that he and his disciples had; with sunny faith he thanked God for it and shared it out. Moved by his example, everyone who had anything did the same; and in the end there was enough, and more than enough, for all.

Barclay continues, "It may be that this is a miracle in which the presence of Jesus turned a crowd of selfish men and women into a fellowship of sharers. It may be that this story represents the biggest miracle of all – one which changed not loaves and fishes, but men and women."³ What a beautiful way of understanding the story.

I've experienced this kind of miracle. I'm able to experience it over and over again, every time I serve at the United Methodist Free Store. I've only worked at the one on the west side, so I can only speak from those experiences. They have a room in the back of the store that is about twenty feet by twenty feet square. In the room is a pile of bags filled with clothing. I call the pile the "Mount of Abundance." I've never been there when the pile was not taller than I am. Whenever I have worked there, my job has always been to open up the bags, sort the clothes, and put them on hangers to be given away in the front of the store.

Each time I work at the store, the pile never seems to go down. I'm the kind of guy who loves to get a job done, so I would love to get all the bags emptied, sorted and hung, so I could see a nice clean floor. I've never seen that happen. You see, while we're emptying and sorting bags and hanging clothes, there are people dropping off more bags of clothes. The pile seems like it never goes down. I clearly remember the time I was working the pile and I realized that what I was feeling must have been similar to what the disciples experienced while feeding the five thousand. The baskets never really got empty, and the pile of clothes never went down, as long as people continued to share what they had.

Well, that's the first miracle story in today's text. The other is my old favorite about Jesus walking on the water. As the story goes, Jesus had gone away by himself. When evening came, the disciples went down to the sea, got in a boat, and headed across the sea

³ Barclay, William. "The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of John, Volume One." Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. P. 238.

in the dark toward Capernaum. The sea became rough and the wind was blowing. The disciples had rowed three or four miles when they saw Jesus walking on the water near the boat. They were afraid, but Jesus said, "It is I, do not be afraid." The disciples wanted him to get in the boat with them, but immediately they were at the shore where they were headed.

The way we have understood this story from our childhood is to picture Jesus, calmly walking on top of the water toward the boat. We can certainly say that Jesus, as the son of God, was able to walk on the water and zip the boat to the shore when the disciples asked him to get in. This understanding speaks of the incredible power of God available through Jesus, and that when the going gets tough, Jesus will be there for us in miraculous ways.

If you can't go with the miraculous explanation, there is another way to understand the story. The Greek preposition "epi" that we translate as "on" when we speak of Jesus walking "on" the water can have a number of different meanings, including on, upon; over; at, by; before, in the presence of; when, under, at the time of. So it is possible that the original Greek meaning was not that Jesus was walking "on" the water, but that Jesus was walking "near" the water, "by" the water, or even "under" the water.

Additionally, the distance of the trip is helpful to know. The disciples started out at Bethsaida, and were travelling to Capernaum. It's about four miles across the sea from Bethsaida to Capernaum. So, when the scripture says that the disciples had already rowed three to four miles, and that their boat immediately reached shore, it is possible that Jesus was following them along the shoreline and they didn't know it. By the time they met up with Jesus, they were almost to the end of the trip, which explains how they "immediately" reached their destination. This understanding might tell us that Jesus is watching us as we go along, letting us struggle on our own, but coming to us when we really need him, giving us the encouragement that we need for that last, most tiring leg of the journey.

You see, I believe that the truth of the scriptures is best found when we are able to hold on to the truth available in all the different ways to understand the scriptures rather than holding one interpretation and discarding all the rest. Take, for instance, today's story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. How much more meaningful can that story be when we allow it to help us understand the miraculous power of Jesus, along with the sacramental nature of the scene as well as the sharing of resources that Jesus initiates. Through the story of Jesus walking on water, we can understand that Jesus can come to us in miraculous and powerful ways when we need him, and we can also understand that Jesus is present all along the way, coming to us when we need him most to get us through the really tough parts, but letting us figure things out on our own most of the way. Any one interpretation is valid, but when you add the various interpretations together, you get something much more beautiful and meaningful.

I think the call to Christian discipleship from this morning's text is to look for the other interpretations of scripture that can make our faith more robust. If you're solidly on

either end of the spectrum, maybe it's time to open up to the other possibilities. If you've sworn off all belief in miracles, maybe it's time to consider that the miraculous isn't necessarily impossible. If you are still holding on to the children's version of the story, maybe it's time to consider some other ways to understand the story. As we do, I believe the stories of our faith will become more meaningful, and will truly have the power to transform our lives. May we be a people who are open enough to allow that to happen.

“Miracles and Unbelief”

John 6:1-21

Rev. Jeff Allen

July 26, 2009

When I was a young boy, I always had a fascination with magic. Now this was way before Harry Potter, so it wasn't wizardry that I was connecting with, it was more about magicians. You know...card tricks, levitation, disappearing acts, sawing pretty ladies in half. I would beg my mom to take me to see David Copperfield or Blackstone when they were in town. Back when they still had magic shops, I just had to go whenever I could, and I couldn't leave the shop without buying some new trick or a special deck of cards that would allow me to amaze my friends and family.

It may not come as a surprise then to find out that the miracle stories of Jesus that are told in this morning's Gospel text have always been my favorite. Such amazing and magical acts Jesus was able to do. I loved those stories from an early age, and I actually have proof of it.

My grandmother, Granny Foy, was the spiritual rock of our family. I cannot remember a time when I visited her that she didn't have a Bible near her chair. As her eyes failed, we would buy her larger and larger print Bibles and magnifying glasses. As her strength failed, she would tear the Bible into its separate books so they would be light enough to hold while she read.

Granny loved to tell me the stories of Jesus all the time when I was a little boy, and I loved to sit on her lap and listen. She gave me this little red Bible on July 1, 1978 – I was four and a half years old at the time. In it, she had underlined my favorite stories, and on the inside front cover, she made a note to tell me what page those stories were on so that I could find them faster. At the top of the list: “Page 192 – Jesus walked on the water.” I remember using her note many times to find that story.

In the imagination of my childhood, Jesus could do amazing and powerful things. He was full of mystery and surprise – just like David Copperfield or Blackstone. Now I knew, as a child, that magic tricks were simply that – tricks. And I knew that Jesus wasn't simply a magician. Jesus was something special. His miracles were real, and they displayed the power of God.

As a grown up (well most of the time), what am I to do with these miracle stories of Jesus? I'm reminded of that verse toward the end of 1 Corinthians 13. It's one that doesn't get read as much at weddings. You know, the verse where Paul writes, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.”¹ And so I wonder, are the miracles of Jesus and other amazing things that happen in the Bible simply childhood fantasies that need to be discarded now that I'm an adult? I have to admit that I'm torn about the answer to that question.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:11

What I do know is that these miracle stories are the kind of stories that cause many adults to stray away from religion. We tell stories like this all the time to children, and it's important that we do. But often we stop with the children's version. I think the church fails when it does not encourage people to engage the scriptures at a level that is appropriate for their age. I think that there are far too many adults who have never been encouraged to move beyond a child-like faith, or given opportunities to do so. And that's when faith begins to break down for many folks.

Can Jesus take five loaves and two fishes and feed five thousand people? Can Jesus really walk on water? Can Jonah really get swallowed by a whale and live to tell the tale? Can someone who has died really come back to life?

If you're asking these questions to a child, the answer is more likely to be, "Sure! Of course! Why not?" If animals can talk, and monsters can sing and dance and teach the alphabet, if teddy bears can have birthday parties, then why can't all those things in the Bible also be true?

Now ask those same questions to an adult, and you may get a variety of answers. On the one side, some might say, "Of course all those things can be true. How can we place a limit on the power of God? God can do anything God wants to do." On the other side, others might respond with, "You know, I just can't go there with you. If you're asking me to believe all these miracles and other things, I just can't. There's no way. Those stories defy the laws of nature, and anyone with a reasonable mind would be silly to believe them."

These two viewpoints represent the two extremes of belief, and we all fall somewhere on the spectrum from one to another. I know a number of good, faithful people who fall on differing sides of the spectrum. So I'm not necessarily here to tell you that one way of believing is better than the other, I'm here to tell you what I think is the good news! No matter where you fall on that spectrum, it's okay. You can still be a faithful Christian and have different understandings about these kinds of Biblical stories.

So what are the ways we can approach the stories in today's text? I've found a variety of valid responses. Let's start with the first story about the feeding of the five thousand. I've heard three compelling ways of understanding this story. The first is the most straightforward, and is the basic way we explain the story to our children. Simply taking it at its face value, we could allow that Jesus truly did perform a miracle with those five loaves and two fishes and fed five thousand people to their fill, with twelve baskets of food left over.

If we're a little skeptical about the miraculous, there's a second way we could understand the story. This second way is a bit more theological. According to the scripture, "Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated."² Sound familiar? Sound like what we remember each time we have

² John 6:11a

communion? Maybe this was a sacramental meal, much like what we experience in Holy Communion. Maybe the way the five loaves and two fishes fed everyone was that each person took just a small piece, like we do with communion. The story says that they each had their fill. Maybe it was a different kind of appetite that was filled through this meal. Maybe their deep hunger to be fulfilled was satisfied in the way that only Jesus Christ can. I like this way of thinking about it.

William Barclay beautifully describes a third option. It's one that I had heard before, but I really like the way he puts it. He says, "There may be another and very lovely explanation. It is scarcely to be thought that the crowd left on a nine-mile expedition without making any preparations at all. If there were pilgrims with them, they would certainly possess supplies for the way. But it may be that they would not produce what they had, for they selfishly – and very humanly – wished to keep it all for themselves. It may then be that Jesus, with that rare smile of his, produced the little store that he and his disciples had; with sunny faith he thanked God for it and shared it out. Moved by his example, everyone who had anything did the same; and in the end there was enough, and more than enough, for all.

Barclay continues, "It may be that this is a miracle in which the presence of Jesus turned a crowd of selfish men and women into a fellowship of sharers. It may be that this story represents the biggest miracle of all – one which changed not loaves and fishes, but men and women."³ What a beautiful way of understanding the story.

I've experienced this kind of miracle. I'm able to experience it over and over again, every time I serve at the United Methodist Free Store. I've only worked at the one on the west side, so I can only speak from those experiences. They have a room in the back of the store that is about twenty feet by twenty feet square. In the room is a pile of bags filled with clothing. I call the pile the "Mount of Abundance." I've never been there when the pile was not taller than I am. Whenever I have worked there, my job has always been to open up the bags, sort the clothes, and put them on hangers to be given away in the front of the store.

Each time I work at the store, the pile never seems to go down. I'm the kind of guy who loves to get a job done, so I would love to get all the bags emptied, sorted and hung, so I could see a nice clean floor. I've never seen that happen. You see, while we're emptying and sorting bags and hanging clothes, there are people dropping off more bags of clothes. The pile seems like it never goes down. I clearly remember the time I was working the pile and I realized that what I was feeling must have been similar to what the disciples experienced while feeding the five thousand. The baskets never really got empty, and the pile of clothes never went down, as long as people continued to share what they had.

Well, that's the first miracle story in today's text. The other is my old favorite about Jesus walking on the water. As the story goes, Jesus had gone away by himself. When evening came, the disciples went down to the sea, got in a boat, and headed across the sea

³ Barclay, William. "The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of John, Volume One." Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. P. 238.

in the dark toward Capernaum. The sea became rough and the wind was blowing. The disciples had rowed three or four miles when they saw Jesus walking on the water near the boat. They were afraid, but Jesus said, "It is I, do not be afraid." The disciples wanted him to get in the boat with them, but immediately they were at the shore where they were headed.

The way we have understood this story from our childhood is to picture Jesus, calmly walking on top of the water toward the boat. We can certainly say that Jesus, as the son of God, was able to walk on the water and zip the boat to the shore when the disciples asked him to get in. This understanding speaks of the incredible power of God available through Jesus, and that when the going gets tough, Jesus will be there for us in miraculous ways.

If you can't go with the miraculous explanation, there is another way to understand the story. The Greek preposition "epi" that we translate as "on" when we speak of Jesus walking "on" the water can have a number of different meanings, including on, upon; over; at, by; before, in the presence of; when, under, at the time of. So it is possible that the original Greek meaning was not that Jesus was walking "on" the water, but that Jesus was walking "near" the water, "by" the water, or even "under" the water.

Additionally, the distance of the trip is helpful to know. The disciples started out at Bethsaida, and were travelling to Capernaum. It's about four miles across the sea from Bethsaida to Capernaum. So, when the scripture says that the disciples had already rowed three to four miles, and that their boat immediately reached shore, it is possible that Jesus was following them along the shoreline and they didn't know it. By the time they met up with Jesus, they were almost to the end of the trip, which explains how they "immediately" reached their destination. This understanding might tell us that Jesus is watching us as we go along, letting us struggle on our own, but coming to us when we really need him, giving us the encouragement that we need for that last, most tiring leg of the journey.

You see, I believe that the truth of the scriptures is best found when we are able to hold on to the truth available in all the different ways to understand the scriptures rather than holding one interpretation and discarding all the rest. Take, for instance, today's story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. How much more meaningful can that story be when we allow it to help us understand the miraculous power of Jesus, along with the sacramental nature of the scene as well as the sharing of resources that Jesus initiates. Through the story of Jesus walking on water, we can understand that Jesus can come to us in miraculous and powerful ways when we need him, and we can also understand that Jesus is present all along the way, coming to us when we need him most to get us through the really tough parts, but letting us figure things out on our own most of the way. Any one interpretation is valid, but when you add the various interpretations together, you get something much more beautiful and meaningful.

I think the call to Christian discipleship from this morning's text is to look for the other interpretations of scripture that can make our faith more robust. If you're solidly on

either end of the spectrum, maybe it's time to open up to the other possibilities. If you've sworn off all belief in miracles, maybe it's time to consider that the miraculous isn't necessarily impossible. If you are still holding on to the children's version of the story, maybe it's time to consider some other ways to understand the story. As we do, I believe the stories of our faith will become more meaningful, and will truly have the power to transform our lives. May we be a people who are open enough to allow that to happen.

“Miracles and Unbelief”

John 6:1-21

Rev. Jeff Allen

July 26, 2009

When I was a young boy, I always had a fascination with magic. Now this was way before Harry Potter, so it wasn't wizardry that I was connecting with, it was more about magicians. You know...card tricks, levitation, disappearing acts, sawing pretty ladies in half. I would beg my mom to take me to see David Copperfield or Blackstone when they were in town. Back when they still had magic shops, I just had to go whenever I could, and I couldn't leave the shop without buying some new trick or a special deck of cards that would allow me to amaze my friends and family.

It may not come as a surprise then to find out that the miracle stories of Jesus that are told in this morning's Gospel text have always been my favorite. Such amazing and magical acts Jesus was able to do. I loved those stories from an early age, and I actually have proof of it.

My grandmother, Granny Foy, was the spiritual rock of our family. I cannot remember a time when I visited her that she didn't have a Bible near her chair. As her eyes failed, we would buy her larger and larger print Bibles and magnifying glasses. As her strength failed, she would tear the Bible into its separate books so they would be light enough to hold while she read.

Granny loved to tell me the stories of Jesus all the time when I was a little boy, and I loved to sit on her lap and listen. She gave me this little red Bible on July 1, 1978 – I was four and a half years old at the time. In it, she had underlined my favorite stories, and on the inside front cover, she made a note to tell me what page those stories were on so that I could find them faster. At the top of the list: “Page 192 – Jesus walked on the water.” I remember using her note many times to find that story.

In the imagination of my childhood, Jesus could do amazing and powerful things. He was full of mystery and surprise – just like David Copperfield or Blackstone. Now I knew, as a child, that magic tricks were simply that – tricks. And I knew that Jesus wasn't simply a magician. Jesus was something special. His miracles were real, and they displayed the power of God.

As a grown up (well most of the time), what am I to do with these miracle stories of Jesus? I'm reminded of that verse toward the end of 1 Corinthians 13. It's one that doesn't get read as much at weddings. You know, the verse where Paul writes, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.”¹ And so I wonder, are the miracles of Jesus and other amazing things that happen in the Bible simply childhood fantasies that need to be discarded now that I'm an adult? I have to admit that I'm torn about the answer to that question.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:11

What I do know is that these miracle stories are the kind of stories that cause many adults to stray away from religion. We tell stories like this all the time to children, and it's important that we do. But often we stop with the children's version. I think the church fails when it does not encourage people to engage the scriptures at a level that is appropriate for their age. I think that there are far too many adults who have never been encouraged to move beyond a child-like faith, or given opportunities to do so. And that's when faith begins to break down for many folks.

Can Jesus take five loaves and two fishes and feed five thousand people? Can Jesus really walk on water? Can Jonah really get swallowed by a whale and live to tell the tale? Can someone who has died really come back to life?

If you're asking these questions to a child, the answer is more likely to be, "Sure! Of course! Why not?" If animals can talk, and monsters can sing and dance and teach the alphabet, if teddy bears can have birthday parties, then why can't all those things in the Bible also be true?

Now ask those same questions to an adult, and you may get a variety of answers. On the one side, some might say, "Of course all those things can be true. How can we place a limit on the power of God? God can do anything God wants to do." On the other side, others might respond with, "You know, I just can't go there with you. If you're asking me to believe all these miracles and other things, I just can't. There's no way. Those stories defy the laws of nature, and anyone with a reasonable mind would be silly to believe them."

These two viewpoints represent the two extremes of belief, and we all fall somewhere on the spectrum from one to another. I know a number of good, faithful people who fall on differing sides of the spectrum. So I'm not necessarily here to tell you that one way of believing is better than the other, I'm here to tell you what I think is the good news! No matter where you fall on that spectrum, it's okay. You can still be a faithful Christian and have different understandings about these kinds of Biblical stories.

So what are the ways we can approach the stories in today's text? I've found a variety of valid responses. Let's start with the first story about the feeding of the five thousand. I've heard three compelling ways of understanding this story. The first is the most straightforward, and is the basic way we explain the story to our children. Simply taking it at its face value, we could allow that Jesus truly did perform a miracle with those five loaves and two fishes and fed five thousand people to their fill, with twelve baskets of food left over.

If we're a little skeptical about the miraculous, there's a second way we could understand the story. This second way is a bit more theological. According to the scripture, "Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated."² Sound familiar? Sound like what we remember each time we have

² John 6:11a

communion? Maybe this was a sacramental meal, much like what we experience in Holy Communion. Maybe the way the five loaves and two fishes fed everyone was that each person took just a small piece, like we do with communion. The story says that they each had their fill. Maybe it was a different kind of appetite that was filled through this meal. Maybe their deep hunger to be fulfilled was satisfied in the way that only Jesus Christ can. I like this way of thinking about it.

William Barclay beautifully describes a third option. It's one that I had heard before, but I really like the way he puts it. He says, "There may be another and very lovely explanation. It is scarcely to be thought that the crowd left on a nine-mile expedition without making any preparations at all. If there were pilgrims with them, they would certainly possess supplies for the way. But it may be that they would not produce what they had, for they selfishly – and very humanly – wished to keep it all for themselves. It may then be that Jesus, with that rare smile of his, produced the little store that he and his disciples had; with sunny faith he thanked God for it and shared it out. Moved by his example, everyone who had anything did the same; and in the end there was enough, and more than enough, for all.

Barclay continues, "It may be that this is a miracle in which the presence of Jesus turned a crowd of selfish men and women into a fellowship of sharers. It may be that this story represents the biggest miracle of all – one which changed not loaves and fishes, but men and women."³ What a beautiful way of understanding the story.

I've experienced this kind of miracle. I'm able to experience it over and over again, every time I serve at the United Methodist Free Store. I've only worked at the one on the west side, so I can only speak from those experiences. They have a room in the back of the store that is about twenty feet by twenty feet square. In the room is a pile of bags filled with clothing. I call the pile the "Mount of Abundance." I've never been there when the pile was not taller than I am. Whenever I have worked there, my job has always been to open up the bags, sort the clothes, and put them on hangers to be given away in the front of the store.

Each time I work at the store, the pile never seems to go down. I'm the kind of guy who loves to get a job done, so I would love to get all the bags emptied, sorted and hung, so I could see a nice clean floor. I've never seen that happen. You see, while we're emptying and sorting bags and hanging clothes, there are people dropping off more bags of clothes. The pile seems like it never goes down. I clearly remember the time I was working the pile and I realized that what I was feeling must have been similar to what the disciples experienced while feeding the five thousand. The baskets never really got empty, and the pile of clothes never went down, as long as people continued to share what they had.

Well, that's the first miracle story in today's text. The other is my old favorite about Jesus walking on the water. As the story goes, Jesus had gone away by himself. When evening came, the disciples went down to the sea, got in a boat, and headed across the sea

³ Barclay, William. "The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of John, Volume One." Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. P. 238.

in the dark toward Capernaum. The sea became rough and the wind was blowing. The disciples had rowed three or four miles when they saw Jesus walking on the water near the boat. They were afraid, but Jesus said, "It is I, do not be afraid." The disciples wanted him to get in the boat with them, but immediately they were at the shore where they were headed.

The way we have understood this story from our childhood is to picture Jesus, calmly walking on top of the water toward the boat. We can certainly say that Jesus, as the son of God, was able to walk on the water and zip the boat to the shore when the disciples asked him to get in. This understanding speaks of the incredible power of God available through Jesus, and that when the going gets tough, Jesus will be there for us in miraculous ways.

If you can't go with the miraculous explanation, there is another way to understand the story. The Greek preposition "epi" that we translate as "on" when we speak of Jesus walking "on" the water can have a number of different meanings, including on, upon; over; at, by; before, in the presence of; when, under, at the time of. So it is possible that the original Greek meaning was not that Jesus was walking "on" the water, but that Jesus was walking "near" the water, "by" the water, or even "under" the water.

Additionally, the distance of the trip is helpful to know. The disciples started out at Bethsaida, and were travelling to Capernaum. It's about four miles across the sea from Bethsaida to Capernaum. So, when the scripture says that the disciples had already rowed three to four miles, and that their boat immediately reached shore, it is possible that Jesus was following them along the shoreline and they didn't know it. By the time they met up with Jesus, they were almost to the end of the trip, which explains how they "immediately" reached their destination. This understanding might tell us that Jesus is watching us as we go along, letting us struggle on our own, but coming to us when we really need him, giving us the encouragement that we need for that last, most tiring leg of the journey.

You see, I believe that the truth of the scriptures is best found when we are able to hold on to the truth available in all the different ways to understand the scriptures rather than holding one interpretation and discarding all the rest. Take, for instance, today's story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. How much more meaningful can that story be when we allow it to help us understand the miraculous power of Jesus, along with the sacramental nature of the scene as well as the sharing of resources that Jesus initiates. Through the story of Jesus walking on water, we can understand that Jesus can come to us in miraculous and powerful ways when we need him, and we can also understand that Jesus is present all along the way, coming to us when we need him most to get us through the really tough parts, but letting us figure things out on our own most of the way. Any one interpretation is valid, but when you add the various interpretations together, you get something much more beautiful and meaningful.

I think the call to Christian discipleship from this morning's text is to look for the other interpretations of scripture that can make our faith more robust. If you're solidly on

either end of the spectrum, maybe it's time to open up to the other possibilities. If you've sworn off all belief in miracles, maybe it's time to consider that the miraculous isn't necessarily impossible. If you are still holding on to the children's version of the story, maybe it's time to consider some other ways to understand the story. As we do, I believe the stories of our faith will become more meaningful, and will truly have the power to transform our lives. May we be a people who are open enough to allow that to happen.

“Miracles and Unbelief”

John 6:1-21

Rev. Jeff Allen

July 26, 2009

When I was a young boy, I always had a fascination with magic. Now this was way before Harry Potter, so it wasn't wizardry that I was connecting with, it was more about magicians. You know...card tricks, levitation, disappearing acts, sawing pretty ladies in half. I would beg my mom to take me to see David Copperfield or Blackstone when they were in town. Back when they still had magic shops, I just had to go whenever I could, and I couldn't leave the shop without buying some new trick or a special deck of cards that would allow me to amaze my friends and family.

It may not come as a surprise then to find out that the miracle stories of Jesus that are told in this morning's Gospel text have always been my favorite. Such amazing and magical acts Jesus was able to do. I loved those stories from an early age, and I actually have proof of it.

My grandmother, Granny Foy, was the spiritual rock of our family. I cannot remember a time when I visited her that she didn't have a Bible near her chair. As her eyes failed, we would buy her larger and larger print Bibles and magnifying glasses. As her strength failed, she would tear the Bible into its separate books so they would be light enough to hold while she read.

Granny loved to tell me the stories of Jesus all the time when I was a little boy, and I loved to sit on her lap and listen. She gave me this little red Bible on July 1, 1978 – I was four and a half years old at the time. In it, she had underlined my favorite stories, and on the inside front cover, she made a note to tell me what page those stories were on so that I could find them faster. At the top of the list: “Page 192 – Jesus walked on the water.” I remember using her note many times to find that story.

In the imagination of my childhood, Jesus could do amazing and powerful things. He was full of mystery and surprise – just like David Copperfield or Blackstone. Now I knew, as a child, that magic tricks were simply that – tricks. And I knew that Jesus wasn't simply a magician. Jesus was something special. His miracles were real, and they displayed the power of God.

As a grown up (well most of the time), what am I to do with these miracle stories of Jesus? I'm reminded of that verse toward the end of 1 Corinthians 13. It's one that doesn't get read as much at weddings. You know, the verse where Paul writes, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.”¹ And so I wonder, are the miracles of Jesus and other amazing things that happen in the Bible simply childhood fantasies that need to be discarded now that I'm an adult? I have to admit that I'm torn about the answer to that question.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:11

What I do know is that these miracle stories are the kind of stories that cause many adults to stray away from religion. We tell stories like this all the time to children, and it's important that we do. But often we stop with the children's version. I think the church fails when it does not encourage people to engage the scriptures at a level that is appropriate for their age. I think that there are far too many adults who have never been encouraged to move beyond a child-like faith, or given opportunities to do so. And that's when faith begins to break down for many folks.

Can Jesus take five loaves and two fishes and feed five thousand people? Can Jesus really walk on water? Can Jonah really get swallowed by a whale and live to tell the tale? Can someone who has died really come back to life?

If you're asking these questions to a child, the answer is more likely to be, "Sure! Of course! Why not?" If animals can talk, and monsters can sing and dance and teach the alphabet, if teddy bears can have birthday parties, then why can't all those things in the Bible also be true?

Now ask those same questions to an adult, and you may get a variety of answers. On the one side, some might say, "Of course all those things can be true. How can we place a limit on the power of God? God can do anything God wants to do." On the other side, others might respond with, "You know, I just can't go there with you. If you're asking me to believe all these miracles and other things, I just can't. There's no way. Those stories defy the laws of nature, and anyone with a reasonable mind would be silly to believe them."

These two viewpoints represent the two extremes of belief, and we all fall somewhere on the spectrum from one to another. I know a number of good, faithful people who fall on differing sides of the spectrum. So I'm not necessarily here to tell you that one way of believing is better than the other, I'm here to tell you what I think is the good news! No matter where you fall on that spectrum, it's okay. You can still be a faithful Christian and have different understandings about these kinds of Biblical stories.

So what are the ways we can approach the stories in today's text? I've found a variety of valid responses. Let's start with the first story about the feeding of the five thousand. I've heard three compelling ways of understanding this story. The first is the most straightforward, and is the basic way we explain the story to our children. Simply taking it at its face value, we could allow that Jesus truly did perform a miracle with those five loaves and two fishes and fed five thousand people to their fill, with twelve baskets of food left over.

If we're a little skeptical about the miraculous, there's a second way we could understand the story. This second way is a bit more theological. According to the scripture, "Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated."² Sound familiar? Sound like what we remember each time we have

² John 6:11a

communion? Maybe this was a sacramental meal, much like what we experience in Holy Communion. Maybe the way the five loaves and two fishes fed everyone was that each person took just a small piece, like we do with communion. The story says that they each had their fill. Maybe it was a different kind of appetite that was filled through this meal. Maybe their deep hunger to be fulfilled was satisfied in the way that only Jesus Christ can. I like this way of thinking about it.

William Barclay beautifully describes a third option. It's one that I had heard before, but I really like the way he puts it. He says, "There may be another and very lovely explanation. It is scarcely to be thought that the crowd left on a nine-mile expedition without making any preparations at all. If there were pilgrims with them, they would certainly possess supplies for the way. But it may be that they would not produce what they had, for they selfishly – and very humanly – wished to keep it all for themselves. It may then be that Jesus, with that rare smile of his, produced the little store that he and his disciples had; with sunny faith he thanked God for it and shared it out. Moved by his example, everyone who had anything did the same; and in the end there was enough, and more than enough, for all.

Barclay continues, "It may be that this is a miracle in which the presence of Jesus turned a crowd of selfish men and women into a fellowship of sharers. It may be that this story represents the biggest miracle of all – one which changed not loaves and fishes, but men and women."³ What a beautiful way of understanding the story.

I've experienced this kind of miracle. I'm able to experience it over and over again, every time I serve at the United Methodist Free Store. I've only worked at the one on the west side, so I can only speak from those experiences. They have a room in the back of the store that is about twenty feet by twenty feet square. In the room is a pile of bags filled with clothing. I call the pile the "Mount of Abundance." I've never been there when the pile was not taller than I am. Whenever I have worked there, my job has always been to open up the bags, sort the clothes, and put them on hangers to be given away in the front of the store.

Each time I work at the store, the pile never seems to go down. I'm the kind of guy who loves to get a job done, so I would love to get all the bags emptied, sorted and hung, so I could see a nice clean floor. I've never seen that happen. You see, while we're emptying and sorting bags and hanging clothes, there are people dropping off more bags of clothes. The pile seems like it never goes down. I clearly remember the time I was working the pile and I realized that what I was feeling must have been similar to what the disciples experienced while feeding the five thousand. The baskets never really got empty, and the pile of clothes never went down, as long as people continued to share what they had.

Well, that's the first miracle story in today's text. The other is my old favorite about Jesus walking on the water. As the story goes, Jesus had gone away by himself. When evening came, the disciples went down to the sea, got in a boat, and headed across the sea

³ Barclay, William. "The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of John, Volume One." Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. P. 238.

in the dark toward Capernaum. The sea became rough and the wind was blowing. The disciples had rowed three or four miles when they saw Jesus walking on the water near the boat. They were afraid, but Jesus said, "It is I, do not be afraid." The disciples wanted him to get in the boat with them, but immediately they were at the shore where they were headed.

The way we have understood this story from our childhood is to picture Jesus, calmly walking on top of the water toward the boat. We can certainly say that Jesus, as the son of God, was able to walk on the water and zip the boat to the shore when the disciples asked him to get in. This understanding speaks of the incredible power of God available through Jesus, and that when the going gets tough, Jesus will be there for us in miraculous ways.

If you can't go with the miraculous explanation, there is another way to understand the story. The Greek preposition "epi" that we translate as "on" when we speak of Jesus walking "on" the water can have a number of different meanings, including on, upon; over; at, by; before, in the presence of; when, under, at the time of. So it is possible that the original Greek meaning was not that Jesus was walking "on" the water, but that Jesus was walking "near" the water, "by" the water, or even "under" the water.

Additionally, the distance of the trip is helpful to know. The disciples started out at Bethsaida, and were travelling to Capernaum. It's about four miles across the sea from Bethsaida to Capernaum. So, when the scripture says that the disciples had already rowed three to four miles, and that their boat immediately reached shore, it is possible that Jesus was following them along the shoreline and they didn't know it. By the time they met up with Jesus, they were almost to the end of the trip, which explains how they "immediately" reached their destination. This understanding might tell us that Jesus is watching us as we go along, letting us struggle on our own, but coming to us when we really need him, giving us the encouragement that we need for that last, most tiring leg of the journey.

You see, I believe that the truth of the scriptures is best found when we are able to hold on to the truth available in all the different ways to understand the scriptures rather than holding one interpretation and discarding all the rest. Take, for instance, today's story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. How much more meaningful can that story be when we allow it to help us understand the miraculous power of Jesus, along with the sacramental nature of the scene as well as the sharing of resources that Jesus initiates. Through the story of Jesus walking on water, we can understand that Jesus can come to us in miraculous and powerful ways when we need him, and we can also understand that Jesus is present all along the way, coming to us when we need him most to get us through the really tough parts, but letting us figure things out on our own most of the way. Any one interpretation is valid, but when you add the various interpretations together, you get something much more beautiful and meaningful.

I think the call to Christian discipleship from this morning's text is to look for the other interpretations of scripture that can make our faith more robust. If you're solidly on

either end of the spectrum, maybe it's time to open up to the other possibilities. If you've sworn off all belief in miracles, maybe it's time to consider that the miraculous isn't necessarily impossible. If you are still holding on to the children's version of the story, maybe it's time to consider some other ways to understand the story. As we do, I believe the stories of our faith will become more meaningful, and will truly have the power to transform our lives. May we be a people who are open enough to allow that to happen.

“Miracles and Unbelief”

John 6:1-21

Rev. Jeff Allen

July 26, 2009

When I was a young boy, I always had a fascination with magic. Now this was way before Harry Potter, so it wasn't wizardry that I was connecting with, it was more about magicians. You know...card tricks, levitation, disappearing acts, sawing pretty ladies in half. I would beg my mom to take me to see David Copperfield or Blackstone when they were in town. Back when they still had magic shops, I just had to go whenever I could, and I couldn't leave the shop without buying some new trick or a special deck of cards that would allow me to amaze my friends and family.

It may not come as a surprise then to find out that the miracle stories of Jesus that are told in this morning's Gospel text have always been my favorite. Such amazing and magical acts Jesus was able to do. I loved those stories from an early age, and I actually have proof of it.

My grandmother, Granny Foy, was the spiritual rock of our family. I cannot remember a time when I visited her that she didn't have a Bible near her chair. As her eyes failed, we would buy her larger and larger print Bibles and magnifying glasses. As her strength failed, she would tear the Bible into its separate books so they would be light enough to hold while she read.

Granny loved to tell me the stories of Jesus all the time when I was a little boy, and I loved to sit on her lap and listen. She gave me this little red Bible on July 1, 1978 – I was four and a half years old at the time. In it, she had underlined my favorite stories, and on the inside front cover, she made a note to tell me what page those stories were on so that I could find them faster. At the top of the list: “Page 192 – Jesus walked on the water.” I remember using her note many times to find that story.

In the imagination of my childhood, Jesus could do amazing and powerful things. He was full of mystery and surprise – just like David Copperfield or Blackstone. Now I knew, as a child, that magic tricks were simply that – tricks. And I knew that Jesus wasn't simply a magician. Jesus was something special. His miracles were real, and they displayed the power of God.

As a grown up (well most of the time), what am I to do with these miracle stories of Jesus? I'm reminded of that verse toward the end of 1 Corinthians 13. It's one that doesn't get read as much at weddings. You know, the verse where Paul writes, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.”¹ And so I wonder, are the miracles of Jesus and other amazing things that happen in the Bible simply childhood fantasies that need to be discarded now that I'm an adult? I have to admit that I'm torn about the answer to that question.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:11

What I do know is that these miracle stories are the kind of stories that cause many adults to stray away from religion. We tell stories like this all the time to children, and it's important that we do. But often we stop with the children's version. I think the church fails when it does not encourage people to engage the scriptures at a level that is appropriate for their age. I think that there are far too many adults who have never been encouraged to move beyond a child-like faith, or given opportunities to do so. And that's when faith begins to break down for many folks.

Can Jesus take five loaves and two fishes and feed five thousand people? Can Jesus really walk on water? Can Jonah really get swallowed by a whale and live to tell the tale? Can someone who has died really come back to life?

If you're asking these questions to a child, the answer is more likely to be, "Sure! Of course! Why not?" If animals can talk, and monsters can sing and dance and teach the alphabet, if teddy bears can have birthday parties, then why can't all those things in the Bible also be true?

Now ask those same questions to an adult, and you may get a variety of answers. On the one side, some might say, "Of course all those things can be true. How can we place a limit on the power of God? God can do anything God wants to do." On the other side, others might respond with, "You know, I just can't go there with you. If you're asking me to believe all these miracles and other things, I just can't. There's no way. Those stories defy the laws of nature, and anyone with a reasonable mind would be silly to believe them."

These two viewpoints represent the two extremes of belief, and we all fall somewhere on the spectrum from one to another. I know a number of good, faithful people who fall on differing sides of the spectrum. So I'm not necessarily here to tell you that one way of believing is better than the other, I'm here to tell you what I think is the good news! No matter where you fall on that spectrum, it's okay. You can still be a faithful Christian and have different understandings about these kinds of Biblical stories.

So what are the ways we can approach the stories in today's text? I've found a variety of valid responses. Let's start with the first story about the feeding of the five thousand. I've heard three compelling ways of understanding this story. The first is the most straightforward, and is the basic way we explain the story to our children. Simply taking it at its face value, we could allow that Jesus truly did perform a miracle with those five loaves and two fishes and fed five thousand people to their fill, with twelve baskets of food left over.

If we're a little skeptical about the miraculous, there's a second way we could understand the story. This second way is a bit more theological. According to the scripture, "Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated."² Sound familiar? Sound like what we remember each time we have

² John 6:11a

communion? Maybe this was a sacramental meal, much like what we experience in Holy Communion. Maybe the way the five loaves and two fishes fed everyone was that each person took just a small piece, like we do with communion. The story says that they each had their fill. Maybe it was a different kind of appetite that was filled through this meal. Maybe their deep hunger to be fulfilled was satisfied in the way that only Jesus Christ can. I like this way of thinking about it.

William Barclay beautifully describes a third option. It's one that I had heard before, but I really like the way he puts it. He says, "There may be another and very lovely explanation. It is scarcely to be thought that the crowd left on a nine-mile expedition without making any preparations at all. If there were pilgrims with them, they would certainly possess supplies for the way. But it may be that they would not produce what they had, for they selfishly – and very humanly – wished to keep it all for themselves. It may then be that Jesus, with that rare smile of his, produced the little store that he and his disciples had; with sunny faith he thanked God for it and shared it out. Moved by his example, everyone who had anything did the same; and in the end there was enough, and more than enough, for all.

Barclay continues, "It may be that this is a miracle in which the presence of Jesus turned a crowd of selfish men and women into a fellowship of sharers. It may be that this story represents the biggest miracle of all – one which changed not loaves and fishes, but men and women."³ What a beautiful way of understanding the story.

I've experienced this kind of miracle. I'm able to experience it over and over again, every time I serve at the United Methodist Free Store. I've only worked at the one on the west side, so I can only speak from those experiences. They have a room in the back of the store that is about twenty feet by twenty feet square. In the room is a pile of bags filled with clothing. I call the pile the "Mount of Abundance." I've never been there when the pile was not taller than I am. Whenever I have worked there, my job has always been to open up the bags, sort the clothes, and put them on hangers to be given away in the front of the store.

Each time I work at the store, the pile never seems to go down. I'm the kind of guy who loves to get a job done, so I would love to get all the bags emptied, sorted and hung, so I could see a nice clean floor. I've never seen that happen. You see, while we're emptying and sorting bags and hanging clothes, there are people dropping off more bags of clothes. The pile seems like it never goes down. I clearly remember the time I was working the pile and I realized that what I was feeling must have been similar to what the disciples experienced while feeding the five thousand. The baskets never really got empty, and the pile of clothes never went down, as long as people continued to share what they had.

Well, that's the first miracle story in today's text. The other is my old favorite about Jesus walking on the water. As the story goes, Jesus had gone away by himself. When evening came, the disciples went down to the sea, got in a boat, and headed across the sea

³ Barclay, William. "The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of John, Volume One." Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. P. 238.

in the dark toward Capernaum. The sea became rough and the wind was blowing. The disciples had rowed three or four miles when they saw Jesus walking on the water near the boat. They were afraid, but Jesus said, "It is I, do not be afraid." The disciples wanted him to get in the boat with them, but immediately they were at the shore where they were headed.

The way we have understood this story from our childhood is to picture Jesus, calmly walking on top of the water toward the boat. We can certainly say that Jesus, as the son of God, was able to walk on the water and zip the boat to the shore when the disciples asked him to get in. This understanding speaks of the incredible power of God available through Jesus, and that when the going gets tough, Jesus will be there for us in miraculous ways.

If you can't go with the miraculous explanation, there is another way to understand the story. The Greek preposition "epi" that we translate as "on" when we speak of Jesus walking "on" the water can have a number of different meanings, including on, upon; over; at, by; before, in the presence of; when, under, at the time of. So it is possible that the original Greek meaning was not that Jesus was walking "on" the water, but that Jesus was walking "near" the water, "by" the water, or even "under" the water.

Additionally, the distance of the trip is helpful to know. The disciples started out at Bethsaida, and were travelling to Capernaum. It's about four miles across the sea from Bethsaida to Capernaum. So, when the scripture says that the disciples had already rowed three to four miles, and that their boat immediately reached shore, it is possible that Jesus was following them along the shoreline and they didn't know it. By the time they met up with Jesus, they were almost to the end of the trip, which explains how they "immediately" reached their destination. This understanding might tell us that Jesus is watching us as we go along, letting us struggle on our own, but coming to us when we really need him, giving us the encouragement that we need for that last, most tiring leg of the journey.

You see, I believe that the truth of the scriptures is best found when we are able to hold on to the truth available in all the different ways to understand the scriptures rather than holding one interpretation and discarding all the rest. Take, for instance, today's story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. How much more meaningful can that story be when we allow it to help us understand the miraculous power of Jesus, along with the sacramental nature of the scene as well as the sharing of resources that Jesus initiates. Through the story of Jesus walking on water, we can understand that Jesus can come to us in miraculous and powerful ways when we need him, and we can also understand that Jesus is present all along the way, coming to us when we need him most to get us through the really tough parts, but letting us figure things out on our own most of the way. Any one interpretation is valid, but when you add the various interpretations together, you get something much more beautiful and meaningful.

I think the call to Christian discipleship from this morning's text is to look for the other interpretations of scripture that can make our faith more robust. If you're solidly on

either end of the spectrum, maybe it's time to open up to the other possibilities. If you've sworn off all belief in miracles, maybe it's time to consider that the miraculous isn't necessarily impossible. If you are still holding on to the children's version of the story, maybe it's time to consider some other ways to understand the story. As we do, I believe the stories of our faith will become more meaningful, and will truly have the power to transform our lives. May we be a people who are open enough to allow that to happen.