

Sermon: Walking in on a Miracle

Year B, Proper 12

[2 Kings 4:42-44](#); [Psalm 145:10-18](#); [Ephesians 3:14-21](#); [John 6:1-21](#)

Offered July 26, 2015 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

So you're standing with the fridge door open and you're looking for ... what, a particular kind of mustard. You've been looking for a good minute and there's a decent chance that the mustard had been used up. So you call out, "Anyone seen the grainy mustard?" And your in house zoning board shows up, moves a container of sour cream, hands you the mustard and says, "You have to look behind things." In that moment, there's clearly no point in saying, "I did." There's no point in saying, "Short of taking everything out, I looked everywhere." And part of the reason there's no point is because you're standing there with the invisible mustard in your hand. Sometimes you just need another pair of eyes to see what is staring you in the face.

In the Christian tradition, we're lucky to have multiple sets of eyes on Jesus. The four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, describe Jesus' ministry from different perspectives. Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the synoptic gospels. Synoptic means "seeing together" — you know what "optic" means and "syn" means "with". Those three gospels all have a similar perspective, like they were standing pretty much shoulder to shoulder. But even then they don't always report the same details. Mark starts his gospel when Jesus is baptized as a grown man. Matthew and Luke start with Jesus as an infant, but Luke has the shepherds and angels and Matthew has the wise men. And even when they report the same scene, they interpret what they see differently. All those police procedurals that we get on TV, *Law & Order*, *CSI*, heck, *Andy Griffiths*, taught all of us that every witness sees a different event, even when they are watching the same thing.

John is another witness, but he stands in a different place from Matthew, Mark and Luke. As best we can tell, his gospel is written 25 to 35 years after the other three. He has many of the same stories as the synoptics, but he does have many that are only reported in his gospel. Today's stories are not one of those. The story of the loaves and the fishes is in all four gospels. The following story, of walking on water, immediately follows the loaves and the fishes, except in Luke, who has the story in another place.

So we can hear today's miracle stories and we can blend all the different versions together and see what Jesus is teaching us there. It's sort of like thinking of the Christmas story with the shepherds and the kings in front of the manger with the baby Jesus. Except that that story isn't really written down anywhere. You can have a written story with shepherds or you can have one with kings, but you can't have one with both.

We can work from memory, that blends all four versions of the stories together, or we can take advantage of this witness that stands in a different place from the others. John has different points to make than the other three, than the synoptics, so the differences can be telling.

In the synoptics, Jesus has been teaching for three days. The multitude gathered around to learn is clearly hungry and Jesus is looking to meet that physical need.

But here, how long has the crowd been following Jesus? Right, not long. Why are they there? Because they are hungry? Go ahead and look, it's right at the start of the story. *Because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick.* (John 6:2).¹

John says Jesus sits down with his disciples. Apparently, back then rabbis taught sitting down. When a rabbi sat down with his disciples, there's some serious teaching coming. Jesus asks how they're going to feed all these people. Philip has an answer: can't be done. But Jesus is teaching, using question and answer. "How are we going to feed all these people?" he asks. What kind of answer might be better than Philip's? [Discussion — leading to something like, You are the bread of life, you can feed them.]

If they are not hungry, but rather intrigued by Jesus' healing powers, why feed them at all? [Discussion — hospitality, a form of welcome, but a form of kinship as well]. So perhaps the miracle here is not so much that so little food fed so many people, but that the Son of God wanted us to be welcome in his company.

More than that, Jesus is still teaching. He has the disciples gather up what is left over. Why do that? It can scarcely matter if the crowd takes home a little extra bread or some is left on the mountainside for the animals to eat. If Jesus is teaching this crowd that we are welcome in God's company, he is also saying something about what gets left behind. Nothing gets left behind. No one gets left behind. Everything and everyone is precious enough to be gathered, even if it looks pretty common, like bread and dried fish.

By telling the story slightly differently, John is showing something different than the other evangelists. Jesus is showing his profound concern for the people who have been entrusted to him. But is not the dominating ownership of a king. When the crowd turns in that direction, Jesus steps away. Jesus is revealing himself in this story again and again.

The passage from Ephesians talks about Paul's wish for the church at Ephesus that they might know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge (Ephesians 3:19). We can't reason our way into a knowledge of the love of God, it is given to us by God.² But we catch glimpses of that love in this story the way that John tells it. Jesus is revealing himself with tenderness and care. Jesus will show hospitality the way we show hospitality, with coffee and gingersnaps down in the Social Hall. This is revelation, the way H. Richard Niebuhr uses it, "Revelation means the moment in our history through which we know ourselves to be known from beginning to end, in which we are apprehended by the knower; it means the self-disclosing of that eternal knower"³.

At the end of day, the disciples head back to Capernaum. They have left Jesus behind, and however they thought he would catch up, they did not expect him to come walking across the water. They don't recognize him and are frightened. They are set off from the rest of the world and have only each other for help. Does that sound familiar? Followers of Jesus, relying on each other, set off from the rest of the world? A bit afraid? Not readily recognizing Jesus in their midst? Yeah, it sounds like church.

¹ This and much of the following argument come from Leonard Theodor Witkamp's "Some Specific Johannine Features in John 6:1-21". *Journal for The Study Of The New Testament* 40 (1990), 43-59.

² Paul J. Achtemeier, "Proper 12, Exegetical Perspective, Ephesians 3:14-21" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 281.

³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 154.

So he reveals himself to them again. And they immediately reach the land toward which they were going (John 6:21). I won't argue that the land is Capernaum. It makes sense in the story. It's another miracle if you like, that the boat, now with Jesus in it, makes landfall so quickly.

Or maybe John saw this story as reassurance that once we knew the love of Christ that surpassed all knowledge, once we were fed when we weren't even hungry, once we were assured that nothing and no one would be left behind, once we recognized Jesus for the eternal knower that he is, our journey was over. We would safely reach the land toward which we were going. The miracle we walked into was not only that bread and fish fed a multitude, not only that a man walked on the storm tossed sea. We walked into the miracle that we are so loved and have been so from the beginning of time until the ending of the world and beyond. Jesus cares for us in the smallest of ways and in the biggest of moments. We just need to open ourselves to the miracle of his revelation.