

**John 6:1-21**

**word count: 2,095**

We're sure to get stuck in this passage. Miracles occur, and we don't like those. Miracles require a suspension of belief, and that pulls us out of our favorite pew in the Church of Factual Fundamentalism. If a story does not contain all of the requisite aspects of a rational, fact-checkable, statistically correct account, the Deacons of Doubt have been instructed to collect the trouble-making passage and shoo it out the narthex doors.

If the Jesus Seminar black-beaded the passage, then we know to ignore it like the miscreant manuscript it is.

After all—it just isn't factual.

Before the Jesus Seminar, there was "The Quest of the Historical Jesus" by Albert Schweitzer. From this I was taught in church as a child that when Jesus walked across the water, it was actually a sand bar, and it only looked like he was walking on water. But if Jesus didn't say to his disciples, "Look, I found this neat sand bar that just happened to lead me right up to the boat," then you have a "Parlor-Trick Jesus," and that isn't what John wants to tell us about him. John's account tells about a Jesus who can perform miracles.

Besides which, it just...doesn't...matter. The question is, "What is this story telling us?"

Passover is near. A large crowd wants to be with Jesus. A small boy has five loaves and two fish. Jesus gives thanks, breaks the bread, gives it to the people, and they are fed. Not only that, there are twelve baskets full of food left that can be carried out to those who are hungry—a figure that correlates with the number of disciples that will carry Jesus' message of love and blessing into the world.

Some will need more of an explanation. How could five loaves of bread and two fish feed five thousand? Here are two theories that were created by people who only ask that their miracles be accompanied by facts: First, they were by the sea where there are some really, really big fish. Whales, really. Enough to go around, if you catch one of those babies. The second story circulating about this passage is that once people saw that bread and fish were being produced, they looked into their own bags and pulled out their own bread and fish and began to pass it around. This makes sense to us—we have no problem relating to the feeding of the five thousand as if it were a giant church potluck. There might even have been a Jell-O salad.

But again—this kind of reading misses the point. Reading it and asking "how" it could have happened factually is to pass by what the poetry of the story is trying to tell us. Let's leave the task of fact-checking miracles (to paraphrase Spiro Agnew) to the "Nattering Nabobs of Non-fiction."

The feeding of the five thousand pre-figures the Last Supper. Jesus takes bread, blesses it, and all who come to him are fed. There is always enough in the blessings that are ours, and there will always be enough spiritual food to those that come after us. The disciples will be charged with carrying their own particular basket of spiritual food out into the world in the time to come, and we who follow will be charged to do the same.

I was wondering, as I started to prepare for today, what it means to carry that particular basket of blessings out into the world. What does it mean to bless someone?

My father and his brother lost their mother at an early age, just before the Depression. Their father lost his job as a president of the Bank of Boston, and he turned himself over to alcohol. The boys were deposited in a summer cabin community on the bay near Cape Cod, where their maternal

Swedish grandmother raised them. Summer residents, many having lost their year-round homes, returned to the bay, winterized their cottages and lived out the Depression in community.

One summer when I was a child, my parents drove me to the cottage at Cromeset Point. My father told me that we would be visiting a house where played as a boy. He said, “You are going to meet someone named Barbara. I used to play with her when I was small, and she will seem like a girl who never grew up to you. While we are visiting, be kind to her. She will want to show you around.”

The cottage was on a corner with a white fence around it, and it was filled with lawn ornaments. Every plaster gnome you can ever remember seeing was on this lawn. There were “alert” deer in groupings, a lawn jockey held up his lantern for Snow White and a giant plastic ladybug, while a collection of cartoon characters gathered around a gazing-ball on a birdbath stand, admiring their blue reflections. Plaster snails meandered on a collision course frozen in time with a mother duck and her ducklings. Whatever the figurines and their configurations were—it looked like a giant party was going on that could come to life only when the adults were asleep and a child’s imagination was fully awakened.

Once inside, my parents settled in to talk with their hostess, who introduced me to her daughter, Barbara. Barbara was forty, had Down Syndrome, and her mother kept her dressed in what made her happiest—an adult version of what she wore as a child, complete with dark bangs and ribbons in her hair. The mother asked her to show me her “friends” in the garden while the adults visited.

Barbara stood, and dutifully took me by the hand. I don’t think she talked, but I remember communicating in some way. Out into the yard we went, where she walked up to each plaster or plastic artwork-friend and pointed, and I was put on the spot to come up with something nice to say. The colors were faded, they were in various stages of disrepair, and the tops of the figures were worn colorless. I know why—Barbara walked up to each one and laid her hands on their heads and held them there for a silent moment before passing on. Because she did it, so did I; though I did not understand at the time what was the significance of what we were doing. The yard wasn’t large, but it took us a while to pay a special visit to every troll, whirligig and fairy. The adults took our return into the house as a cue to break up their visit.

In the car, my parents asked me about what it was like to be with Barbara, and I told them about how she placed her hands on top of every lawn ornament. I asked what that meant.

My father was silent for a while, and then told me how hard things had been for people when he was growing up. The way I now comprehend his answer after all these years is this: he made me understand that when some people said good-bye to each other, they often put their hands on each others’ heads, as if conferring a blessing or prayer on the other person. Times were hard—people were sorely tried and a blessing in an “I-Thou” moment with another person was food for the journey.

Barbara spent her lifetime conferring blessings. She learned it from her community, both human and plaster cast.

There are blessings enough for everyone—they multiplied among the five thousand by the shore of Galilee. Maybe the miracle isn’t the fact that such food for the journey is so easily multiplied, but that it surrounds us in such commonplace ways that the miracle really is that we see it at all.

Albert Einstein once said, “There are two ways to live: you can live as if nothing is a miracle, or you can live as if everything is a miracle.”

The crowds came to Jesus because of the blessings he could confer in food for the journey. The bread stands for the blessing—it was not the physical nourishment that bread gives that was

important. Twelve baskets remained full of similar food for those who followed him to give likewise. Baskets are full even now, in times of uncertainty and instability, and they wait by our seats today for us to take out and give away the spiritual food therein recklessly, believing there will always be more where that comes from.

What happens when we live our lives this way changes us.

Barbara Brown Taylor is considered one of the twelve most effective preachers in America, and I just finished her new book, “An Altar in the World.” In it, she says,

“The next time you are at the airport, try blessing the people sitting at the departure gate with you. Every one of them is dealing with something significant. See that mother trying to contain her explosive two-year old? See that pock-faced boy with the huge belly? Even if you cannot know for sure what is going on with them, you can still give a care. They are on their way somewhere, the same way you are. They are between places too, with no more certainty than you about what will happen at the other end. Pronounce a silent blessing and pay attention to what happens in the air between you and that other person.” (p. 202)

This affirms what I began doing a while ago to take my mind off my own dislike of flying. There is not one part of it that I enjoy, so I am trying to create a spiritual practice that can turn around my fear of flying by refocusing the experience. It doesn’t help that as I leave the house, I start writing a third-person narrative in my head:

“Little did he know when he closed the door of his red convertible and slid down the driveway that his last glance upward at the high-peaked roof of their little English country cottage would indeed be his last, and that within two hours he would know what it was like to experience the spiraling downward plunge of a 747 as it drew him to his watery grave in the Pacific Ocean.”

I shut down in the lines for security screening and I am on the look-out for the Airport Security Line Martinet who declares, “People, have your boarding passes and identification out and READY. Do *not* make me repeat myself.”

To counteract these feelings, I started giving non-verbal blessings to people. I randomly single out people and silently wish them well on their journey. The blessings range from wishing health and healing to those who appear to be struggling, to blessings for a good and happy life. No one knows I am doing this. The result is interesting. By giving silent blessings for a good trip, good health, or a happy life, I am finding myself more at ease, almost as if unseen people are blessing me in return. The focus moves away from me and onto others.

You are a blessing to people every day—you carry your basket of blessings unseen, but in how you relate with compassion to the people around you puts you as close to God as you can get. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “To learn to look with compassion on everything that is; to see past the terrifying demons outside to the bawling hearts within; to make the first move toward the other, however many times it takes to get close; to open your arms to what *is* instead of waiting until it is what it *should be*; to surrender the justice of your own cause for mercy; so surrender the priority of your own safety for love—this is to land at God’s breast. To pronounce a blessing on something is to see it from the divine perspective.” (p. 206)

This is inherent in the story of the loaves and fishes—Jesus shows how the supply of blessings is inexhaustible, so much so that baskets are left for his disciples and people like us to carry and distribute to whomever has need of them.

Barbara walked through a fenced-in yard, bestowing blessings on the world that was closest to her understanding—all in all, a life well spent. We could do likewise.

The poet Rilke said, “This is the miracle that happens every time to those who really love; the more they give, the more they possess.”

Loaves and fishes do abound. Amen.

