

Genesis 32:22-31 Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”

Romans 9:1-5 “I am not lying.”

Matthew 14:13-21 “They need not go away. You give them something to eat.”

God Has No Hands but Our Hands

O God of grace, may we have the wisdom, the strength, and the courage to seek always and everywhere after truth – come when it may and cost what it will.

One of the things you will learn about me (if you haven't already) is that I am often critical of the lectionary – the ordered system scheduling Bible lessons to be read in church. I am often a critic of the lectionary, but it's something that I love to wrestle with – something I will not let go until I receive its blessing. Over the course of weeks, selections from a book of the Bible, say, the Gospel of Matthew, will get read in sequence. That I like. But then verses will get skipped without explanation. For example, we've been hearing from the part of Matthew where Jesus has been offering encouragement and inspiration through parables, teaching that the gates of heaven are wide open, welcoming folks who never thought they had a prayer of entering the realm of God.

What happens next in Matthew's telling is that Jesus learned that his minister, John, the one who baptized him, had been beheaded by the government. The impact in the story is like getting punched in the stomach. Maybe that's why it's skipped. Maybe it's just not light enough for summer church reading, but I think we don't do justice to the familiar story about a miraculous meal unless we remember the context in which it was told. Jesus' beloved “way-preparer” has just had his head served up on a platter so that the king could “save face” at his birthday party. John's disciples had retrieved the corpse and buried it; and then they went to tell Jesus. That's where today's Gospel reading picks up.

Matthew says, “Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place by himself.” The crowd, sad and sick and hungry, and probably afraid, searched him out. When he saw them, he had compassion for them – moved, perhaps, by their desperation. The disciples, however, were not feeling quite as compassionate – or maybe they were just more realistic. They were aware that it was getting late. *They* were tired; *they* were sad; *they* were hungry; *they* were afraid. They wanted Jesus to send the crowd away – but they weren't sure how to say it. They knew Jesus cared about making sure hungry people were fed. “Jesus, why don't you send them into the villages so that they can get some food for themselves,” the disciples suggested hopefully.

Can you imagine their faces when Jesus said, “They don't need to go away. *You* give them something to eat.” Wouldn't you love to have seen their facial expressions? “*You* give them something to eat.” Their response was incredulous. “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” We barely have enough for a snack for us, much less for *this* hungry crowd. Are you kidding Jesus? Are you crazy?

Kidding no. Crazy, well..... And what happens next is the miracle. But what exactly did happen? I mean, how did it happen? Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest in Georgia, has this great riff on what might have happened. She writes, “did Jesus multiply the loaves all at once, so that the disciples had to recruit people to help them carry all that bread? Or did it happen

as the loaves were being passed through the crowd? When someone tore off a chunk of bread, did the loaf suddenly grow? As you reached out to take the loaf, did it sort of jump in your hand and get bigger? Or did new loaves appear while no one was looking? Maybe you set yours down for a moment as you shifted your child from one arm to the other, and when you reached down to pick it up again, there were two loaves instead of one. How did it happen exactly? Matthew does not tell us.”¹ And, you know, I personally don’t think any of those things happened. Does that mean that it really wasn’t a miracle?

Well let’s back up a minute. You know, the Gospel of Matthew, written in Greek, doesn’t actually even use the word miracle (ever). The word miracle comes from a Latin word that means a wonder, something that excites admiring awe that can’t be explained by natural law. That’s something that the later church retroactively applied. What Matthew was writing about again and again was Jesus’ power (the Greek word is *dynamis* – related to dynamite) to excite, to inspire, to show people who had been operating on a model of scarcity, God’s model of abundance. Jesus’ *dynamis* could turn what looked like not enough, into more than enough. And I’d call it a miracle when that happens. It’s not magic, but it is a miracle.

It’s a miracle when someone who is sad and tired and wants to be alone, but who is followed by a crowd, sees the crowd and feels compassion. It’s a miracle when we give over what we have – when we overcome the shame that what we have is too puny to matter or to make a difference, or the fear that if we give over the little we have, we’ll have absolutely nothing left for ourselves, or the sadness and exhaustion and fear that come from trying to make our way in a world where people’s heads regularly get served up on platters. It’s a miracle when, from our lonely and fearful places, we risk giving more than we can “afford” – whether it’s food or time or other gifts because we’ve heard Jesus say “you give them something to eat.” “*You* take care of them.”

There is a rabbinical story I learned from Rabbi Larry Kushner, who has long been one of my teachers: A long time ago in the northern part of Israel, in the town of Tsefat, a man who was a baker was sleeping, as usual, through Shabbat morning services. Every now and then, he would almost wake up, trying to get comfortable on the hard wooden bench, and then sink back into a deep sleep. One morning he awoke just long enough to hear the chanting of the Torah verses from Leviticus 24:5-6 in which God instructs the children of Israel to place twelve loaves of *challah* on a table in the ancient wilderness tabernacle.

When services ended, the man woke up, not realizing that all he heard was the Torah reading about how God wanted twelve loaves of *challah*. He thought that God had come to him in his sleep and had asked him personally to bring twelve loaves of *challah* to God. The man felt honored that God should single him out, but he also felt a little foolish. Of all the things God could want from a person, twelve loaves of *challah* did not seem very important. But who was he to argue with God. He went home and baked the bread.

Upon returning to the synagogue, he decided the only proper place for his holy gift was alongside the Torah scrolls in the ark. (You know, we have an ark of the covenant in our chancel – it’s moved to the side when Boston Jewish Spirit is not having services, but if you don’t know what an ark looks like, come up after the service and get a good look.) Anyway, the baker carefully arranged the loaves and said to God, “Thank You for telling me what You want of me. Pleasing You makes me very happy.” Then he left.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven* (Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publications, 1990), p. 28.

No sooner had he gone than the poorest Jew in the town, the synagogue janitor, entered the sanctuary. All alone, he spoke to God. "O Lord, I am so poor. My family is starving; we have nothing to eat. Unless You perform a miracle for us, we will surely perish." Then, as was his custom, he walked around the room to tidy it up. When he ascended the bimah and opened the ark, there before him were twelve loaves of challah! "A miracle!" exclaimed the poor man, "I had no idea You worked so quickly! Blessed are You, O God, who answers our prayers." Then he ran home to share the bread with his family. There was enough to feed his family, enough to sell some, and enough to give some bread away to another hungry family.

Minutes later, the man who had baked the bread returned to the sanctuary, curious to know whether or not God had eaten the chalah. Slowly he ascended the bimah, opened the ark, and saw that the loaves were gone. "Oh, my God!" he shouted, "You really ate my challot! I thought You were teasing. This is wonderful. You can be sure that I'll bring another twelve loaves – with raisins in them too!"

The following week, he brought a dozen loaves to the synagogue and again left them in the ark. Minutes later, the poor man entered the sanctuary. "God, I don't know how to say this, but I'm out of food again. Seven loaves we ate, four we sold, and one we gave to charity. But now, nothing is left and, unless You do another miracle, we surely will starve." He approached the ark and slowly opened its doors. "Another miracle!" he cried, twelve more loaves, and with raisins too! Thank You God; You are wonderful!"

The challah exchange became a weekly ritual that continued for many years. And, like most rituals that become routine, neither man gave it much thought. Then, one day, the rabbi, detained in the sanctuary longer than usual, watched one man place the dozen loaves in the ark and the other man redeem them.

The rabbi called the two men together and told them what they had been doing.

"I see," said the first man sadly, "I thought I had been giving bread to God, but God doesn't really eat chalah." "I see," said the other man sadly, "I thought I had been receiving bread from God, but God doesn't really bake chalah." Then the rabbi asked them to look at their hands. "Your hands," he said to the first man, "are the hands of God giving food to those who are hungry. And your hands," said the rabbi to the other man, "also are the hands of God, receiving gifts from those who have more than enough to eat. God has no hands but our hands."²

² Slightly modified version of how the story is told in *The Book of Miracles: A Young Person's Guide to Jewish Spiritual Awareness*, by Lawrence Kushner (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997), pp. 67-71.