

Nathan Brown  
 "The Trouble With Miracles"  
 July 26, 2009  
 West Side Christian Church

John 6:1-21

Things are slow in Heaven one day, so Moses suggests to Jesus that they go down to Earth and play a round of golf; Jesus agrees.

On the first hole, there's a long fairway with a water hazard before the green. Standing at the championship tee, Moses points to the novice tees and says, "Jesus, I think we should tee off from up there. I don't think we can make it over the water from here."

Jesus replies, "I've seen Arnold Palmer make his shot from here many times, and if Arnold Palmer can do it, so can I."

Jesus puts his ball down and drives it toward the green. It sails up over the fairway, out over the water, then SPLASH, it falls in the water. Moses walks out, parts the water, retrieves Jesus' ball, and brings it back.

"Jesus," Moses says, "I really think we should tee off from up there. I don't think we can make it over the water from here."

Jesus insists, "I've seen Arnold Palmer make his shot from here many times, and if Arnold Palmer can do it, so can I."

Jesus again puts his ball down and drives it toward the green. It sails up over the fairway, out over the water, then SPLASH, it falls in the water. Moses walks out, parts the water, retrieves the ball, and brings it back.

"Jesus," Moses says, "I really don't think we can make it over the water from here. If you shoot from back here again and your ball goes in the water, I'm not going to get it."

Jesus again explains to Moses, "I've seen Arnold Palmer make his shot from here many times, and if Arnold Palmer can do it, so can I."

Jesus again puts his ball down and drives it toward the green. It sails up over the fairway, out over the water, then SPLASH, it falls in the water. Moses looks at Jesus and stands at the tee, with no intention of retrieving Jesus' ball. Jesus figures he'll have to retrieve his own ball, so he walks down the fairway to the water hazard, and proceeds to walk on the water out to the point where his ball fell in.

Moses is still back at the tee when a foursome comes through and sees Jesus walking on water. "Holy mackerel!," one of them says, "Does that guy think he's Jesus?"

"No", Moses answers, "he thinks he's Arnold Palmer."

One of those "cute" prayers of children asks, "Dear God, how come you don't do any miracles now?" I can remember praying this prayer, as a child, myself. The

Gospels abound with miracles attributed to Jesus—two of them (Jesus feeding the five thousand and Jesus walking on water) appear in this very passage this morning.

However, at a certain point in our childhood, our modern minds take over and question the illogical, doubt the unthinkable, and give up on the miraculous. The longer we live, the more cynical about miracles we become, until they are stories that carry truth, but at the end of the day can be explained rationally.

For instance, we end up interpreting the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand as: most those who had gathered on that beach must have had a little food tucked away in their tunics, something they planned to sneak off and eat by themselves, but that the presence of Jesus compelled them to share what they had so that there was plenty for everyone with even twelve baskets left over, and that their open-handedness with one another was the real miracle.

There is a good message in this interpretation, but at the end of the day, it explains away the miraculous. It doesn't take seriously the possibility of the divine at work and it allows for the preacher to make light of it in a bad joke on Sunday morning.

Here lies part of the trouble with miracles: they *are* illogical, unreasonable, and unbelievable. Part of the trouble with miracles, for us, is that the Bible says they are miraculous! The Bible says in this passage that Jesus worked a sign, a wonder, and that when the people saw it they knew who he was.

The feeding of the five thousand was understood by them as God's divine hand in human affairs, God's supernatural interruption of the natural order—bread where there had been no bread, fish where there had been no fish—nothing about hidden food in tunics, nothing about Jesus' presence compelling people to share, just a miraculous event.<sup>1</sup>

Imagine if Jesus had performed this miracle in a contemporary congregation. One might expect the trustees to echo Phillip's money-management concern, pointing out that the congregation does not take in enough revenue to support such a project. The outreach committee might reinforce Andrew's position, stating that the congregation has earmarked only a small percentage of its income for mission giving and the proposed project's needs far exceed the allocated amount.

The groups responsible for discipleship and worship may not even offer an opinion, as they are busy preparing for a fast-approaching religious festival. The property committee may assist with seating everyone on the lawn, although some members might worry about the effects of this event on the property's landscaping.

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Barbara. "Before Miracles." *Lectionary Homiletics*. Back Issues Plus. John 6:1-21.

It is likely that none of the congregation's boards or committees would expect to participate in a miracle because *we* just don't see the miraculous anymore. In fact, I am not sure we even believe in miracles at all. Deep down, we all still pray that childhood question, "Dear God, why don't you do any miracles now?"<sup>2</sup>

Yet, I can't help but wonder if our doubt and our questions don't point out a human hunger for miracles, for positive proofs of God's existence that will change us on the spot into happier, healthier, holier human beings. In fact, I think that in our rationalizing and explaining away the miraculous, we are halfway protecting ourselves, halfway explaining why we don't believe in the miraculous anymore.

Yes, I think, we all wish for miracles—it is the wish to be changed, to be convinced, to be made to believe by something supernaturally but undeniably true. It is the wish to have my doubt taken away for good, to have proof of God and my own story to tell about the miracle that has happened to me.

Isn't that what we would all like on some level? Something, some experience that would make us have faith so that we would never have to wonder again?

I think it was C. S. Lewis who pointed out that a miracle is something that takes your freedom away along with your doubts, something that leaves you no choice but to believe. You witness a miracle and it makes you have faith.

But I am not so sure about that. Without faith, there are always other explanations for even the best miracles: Did you hear the voice of God? It sounded like ordinary thunder to me. Was she healed of her illness? It was probably psychosomatic in the first place. Did they survive the car accident? They must have been wearing their seat belts.

No, I guess not; come to think of it, I guess there is no proof for anything that really matters in the world. How do you prove that your child is beautiful to you? How do you prove the infinite worth of your friend, or the loveliness of the world, or the goodness of your life? Those may be homegrown miracles, but there is no evidence for any of them, nothing that could prove them to anyone else or to you if you did not believe in them first.

Could it be, then, that we have gotten it all backwards somehow? Could it be that the real trouble with miracles for us is that belief in them does not come after the miraculous, but before? That which makes something holy—what makes it a glowing and life-giving wonder—is not something about it, but something about us—that we are creatures able to make use of our freedom, to believe in spite of our

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<sup>2</sup> Yust. Karen Marie. "Pastoral Perspective." *Feasting On The Word*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. Proper 12 (Sunday Between July 24 and July 30 Inclusive). Pg. 284

doubts, to have faith without proof—and that because of those capacities in us we are able to see the miraculous all around us.<sup>3</sup>

In 1946, when Mother Theresa came face to face with the masses of suffering and dying in Calcutta, she experienced what she called the “call within the call,” namely, to serve those suffering the most. Certainly her knowledge or her wealth or her wisdom would not be enough to fulfill a calling to the poorest of the earth.

Yet love fueled the passion of that call, and with that passion she began the Missionaries of Charity, a small order of thirteen members. In the ensuing decades, the order grew to thousands of members giving care in a number of orphanages and charity centers. Love multiplied resources and made her Charity into a ministry that meets the needs of thousands. What’s not miraculous about that?

In 1976, when Millard and Linda Fuller began Habitat for Humanity International, there were few resources and a great need for affordable and decent housing for the working poor. With few tools and a small group of volunteers, it would have been easy to ask, “What are they among so many?” Yet the passion for justice grounded in the incarnation of Jesus compelled them forward. Today Habitat for Humanity serves as a clear testimony to the miraculous.<sup>4</sup>

In 1994, Pastors Joe and Linda Wingo found their hearts going out to the families of their local community in Monroe, GA, affected by the recent industrial plant closings. On their back porch, the first Angel Food distribution fed 34 families. Over the next few years, other churches wanted to get involved, and Angel Food began feeding hundreds of families across the southeast.<sup>5</sup>

Now, Angel Food feeds over 500,000 families a month in 42 states. Our orders for Angel Food, here at West Side, in just 5 months have more than tripled. Are you sure you don’t believe in miracles?

If our belief comes first, if our faith does not require convincing or persuading, then maybe we might even see the most miraculous of things, in the most ordinary parts of our lives—most notably, the miracle of voices of fellow human beings, telling us that we are loved, that we are precious in their sight, and that they want to link their lives with ours. And, as a result, perhaps we might change our prayer to, “Dear God, thank you for the miracles you perform in my life every day.”

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor, Barbara. Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Johns, Cheryl Bridges. “Homiletical Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word*. Ibid. Pg. 289.

<sup>5</sup> [angelfoodministries.com](http://angelfoodministries.com)