“Miracles – They Can Happen!”
John 6:1-21

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From the Pulpit
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It sounds like it was a lovely day, there on a grassy hillside near the Sea of Galilee. A great day for a picnic! Jesus had been busy in the previous days, teaching and healing, and he’d gained a bit of a reputation at this point. People knew of him and flocked to be wherever he was, excited to hear what he had to say and primed to see what he would do. Many of them were anxiously looking for a leader. One who would overthrow the Roman power and free them from their oppressive circumstances. I envision the scene that day on the hillside as a pleasant gathering, with family and friends exchanging greetings, children running among the crowd playing and engaging with each other. And I’m sure there were some who gathered in small groups, concerned about this Jesus, wondering what he was up to, and questioning exactly what was going to happen next. There were most likely some political undertones rumbling, some spies, if you will, who were there to keep a finger on the pulse and get a sense of the crowd’s response. There may have even been some there who were not entirely scrupulous. Pick pocketing might have been easy that day, if folks weren’t paying close attention to their personal belongings. So, all in all, it seems like it could have been a pretty diverse crowd on that hillside.
In the midst of it all, Jesus catches the vibe that the folks are hungry. But all there is to offer is 5 barley loaves and 2 fish from a little boy in the crowd. And then the miracle happens. Jesus gives thanks and distributes the food; all eat their fill and the disciples gather 12 baskets of leftovers! A miracle! The grace and power of God, shown through the actions of Jesus.

Later that day, Jesus separates himself from the crowd who wants to take him by force and make him their King, and the disciples head out in their boat without Jesus. The winds whip up and the water gets rough. Through their fear and concern, the disciples see Jesus, walking across the water toward them. Jesus calms their fears by identifying himself, the disciples want him to join them in the boat, and immediately the boat is on the shore to which they are headed. Another miracle!

If you’re anything like me, you can hear these stories and sort of be comfortable with their content. After all, it’s Jesus, right? Of course these miracles can happen. Jesus had all of God’s power and grace at his fingertips. He could change water to wine, heal sick people, restore sight to the blind and even bring people back from the dead! So of course, he
could feed 5000 people with 5 loaves and 2 little fish. It’s Jesus!

Miracles are defined in different ways by different people. Many definitions refer to a miracle as an event that happens in contrast to the natural order of things, or in opposition to nature. In his article entitled, Miracles: A Journalist Looks at Modern Day Experiences of God’s Power, Tim Stafford defines miracles as “occasions when God walks on unusual paths.” They are not more God-inspired than, say, the daily sunrise. They are just an unusual break from the way God ordinarily works, and thus a signal of something important.

Stafford goes on to share that “Jesus’ feeding of the 5,000 was in one sense far less significant than an event no one comments on at all: the wheat harvest. It strains belief that a [dehydrated, shriveled] kernel of wheat can be transformed into a wheat plant. Year after year it happens in thousands of locations around the world. It feeds the world by the power of God, but nobody marvels.

Let Jesus multiply a lunch, once, for a crowd of a few thousand, and we do wonder. Not that it is more significant or God-empowered than the wheat crop. Only that it is a rarity we never see. It is a sign—that Jesus, through whom
wheat was made, and who sustains and empowers its growth—is on the move in an unusual way: his kingdom, long promised, is breaking in.”

One other factor to this miracle story that I find significant? This miracle didn’t just happen. 5000 bellies weren’t just suddenly filled. The people gathered to hear from Jesus. There was initiative on their part. The little boy carried his loaves and fish with him for his lunch. And he offered them to the disciples to give to Jesus. The disciples, following Jesus’ lead, then invited the people to sit down – hospitality was shown. The people participated – they chose to eat. And leftovers were gathered for future use, so none was lost. It took all these players in the scene, all these actions to come together, in order for the miracle to occur and be documented so it could be told to us.

Don’t you just wish we could see a miracle like that today?

Earlier this summer, I had the joy of being a camp counselor at Camp Christian, the camp facility run by our sister denomination, The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I got to spend 3 days with over 70 2nd through 4th graders. In my cabin of 10 girls, there were some interesting dynamics, right off the bat. All the girls except one either
had a sibling or a friend from church, or both, in the cabin with them. There was just one little girl, Haley, who arrived at our cabin alone. And of course she was the last to arrive. As the other girls were already circled around a big piece of poster board, making our cabin sign with all their names on it, I was busy trying to determine the best way to get Haley assimilated into the group and not feeling left out. But before I could even open my mouth, one of the campers jumped up to help Haley get her bed made and get settled in. Another invited her over to help with the poster. They all started introducing themselves and explaining who had come with whom and how they knew each other. Haley picked up a marker and started helping to decorate the poster. As she was drawing, she simply said, “I’m here by myself. I don’t have any friends.” And without missing a beat, one of the other girls reached over and grabbed her hand and said, “You do now. You have all of us!” Instantaneously, 10 individual campers, starting out as 3 or 4 little subgroups, had just created a bond that only grew stronger as the week progressed. The power and grace of God, shown through the actions of the girls in that cabin.
A few weeks later, I was privileged to attend our United Church of Christ General Synod, the national biennial gathering of our denomination. At General Synod, there were several impactful resolutions presented, discussed and voted on. Many created some controversy and were topics that generated heated debate. In addition to a variety of significant business items such as the denomination’s own structure, race issues in the US (including mass incarceration and the Washington, DC football team name), and global issues (such as the unification of Korea and the Armenian Genocide), Synod also addressed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The General Synod adopted a resolution entitled, “A Call for the United Church of Christ to Take Actions toward a Just Peace in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.”

This resolution calls upon the UCC to do several things, including:

1. Divest from companies that profit from the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and people

2. Boycott products made by companies that operate in illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories
3. Continue to engage in interfaith dialogue, including with Jewish colleagues and organizations.

This resolution does not call for boycott or divestment from Israel, but from companies that profit from the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and people. There is an important distinction between a boycott or divestment from Israel and what the resolution calls for. The resolution addresses the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and its people; it does not challenge Israel’s existence. It seeks to employ a non-violent tactic to bring an end to the occupation, in response to the authentic and clear call of Palestinian Christian partners. The resolution focuses on Israeli policies; it does not seek to provoke or alienate our Jewish partners and friends. It does hope to stimulate dialogue on the realities of occupation and on the conflict as a whole.

Another resolution passed at General Synod calls for converting the economy from reliance on fossil fuels to renewable energy sources, energy conservation, and energy efficiency. In the original text, the resolution called for total transition to be complete by 2080, but that date became a major question in committee discussion. The question of urgency raised itself throughout the discussion and early on,
several delegates commented that they learned the issues was more important than they knew. Ultimately, General Synod voted to pass the resolution, but changed the date from 2080 to 2040. Other language added in urges local churches to model their environmental justice commitments in their religious and administrative buildings, and in their overall spending.

Now, each delegate at General Synod was randomly assigned to be on one of the committees that discussed each resolution. I was assigned to the committee that worked on the fossil fuel resolution. One fascinating moment occurred when someone on the committee asked how we thought we could bring about a total transition to renewable energy by 2080, much less earlier and questioned whether our resolution really had any chance of having an impact on our country and our world. Really, did we actually think our resolution could make a difference? Another committee member responded by reminiscing about being at General Synod in 2005 when the UCC voted to affirm marriage equality for all persons. She remembered that many people, while certainly acknowledging the importance and relevance of that vote, wondered if it truly would have any impact. Many people, herself included, while celebrating that vote in 2005, also believed that they would never see it come into
reality in their lifetime. She shared that with us just 2 days after the Supreme Court announcement making marriage equality the law of the land in the United States. With her reminiscing, she underscored for us all the potential impact of the decisions made at General Synod and how they can truly affect history.

Both these resolutions, the question of how to respond to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the call for a transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources, as well as many others created tension and some conflict during the course of the discussions. The amazing piece of this is that thousands of caring and passionate people gathered, discussed, voiced their different opinions, voted as to our denomination’s response, and moved beyond our differing opinions on one topic, to address the next topic. Then we, as a body, worshiped together, shared communion together, and fellowshipped together. Our mutual love and respect for each other as faithful and valuable children of God was evident through all these moments, those of conflict and tension, and those of worship, communion and fellowship.
The power and grace of God, shown through the people giving of their time and giving of themselves at General Synod.

Do miracles still happen today? Does God still walk on unusual paths in our world and in our time? I believe that answer is yes! Absolutely! For me, the more pressing question is this: Are our eyes open to seeing God on an unusual path? Are our hearts open to experiencing God on an unusual path? And are we willing to join God on that path? It’s on that path, with the power and grace of God, that we can change the world. Thanks be to God.

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