Sunday, September 19, 1971
HELPING MIRACLES HAPPEN
Mark 6:30-44

Introduction

We don't often think of ourselves as being able to take part in miracles, but it can happen and sometimes quite unexpectedly. The story of the feeding of the 5000, which was our New Testament lesson this morning is an example. In some ways this account is like a parable in that it contains some important clues as to how we are to face problems and opportunities which confront us as Christians and as church congregations. The story also reveals how we can help miracles happen!

To better understand it, let's first recall a few of the highlights of the story. Mark tells us that Jesus had been wanting to get away from the crowds so that he and his disciples could rest and refresh themselves. We know how it is when we've been deeply involved with a lot of people over a period. Sometimes we feel the need to get away and be by ourselves for a time.

However, in this case the attempt was not successful. As soon as Jesus and the disciples got to the other side of the lake and emerged from the boat, another large crowd was waiting for them. And again, Jesus began to teach and heal. As the day wore on, his disciples got worried because the crowd was getting hungry and restless. No doubt the disciples were as hungry as anyone. So, they suggested to Jesus that he send the people away to the nearest farms and villages to get food.

Jesus, however asked the disciples to find some way to feed the crowd. But to them, it seemed impossible. They didn't have enough money to buy that amount of food. Nor could they have carried it back. But Jesus persisted-- "how many loaves are available here? What can you find? Go and see!" In other words, take an inventory of what resources are available here and now.

Here, the story as recorded by John's gospel adds that a small boy came forward and offered his lunch of five loaves and two fish. This the disciples reported to Jesus. But they asked, "What is that among so many?"

Jesus, however, asked the people to sit down in smaller groups, and taking the five loaves and two fish, he asked God's blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples to distribute. In the same way he divided the two fish among them. The Bible reports that after all had eaten what they needed, twelve baskets of left- overs were picked up.

Some problems with the story

Now it would be possible as with many of the other miracle stories in the Bible to spend a great deal of time argu-ing or worrying about certain details in the story or trying to figure out what else might have happened on that day. Some have said, for example, that many of the people in the crowd probably had small lunches with them and because of the example of the little boy and the spirit of Jesus and the moment, shared what they had with others near them, and thus all had something to eat. But even if that's what happened, it's a kind of miracle.

On the other hand, there are miracles of multiplication every day. A little corn planted in the ground grows into a lot of corn; particularly here in Nebraska, I'm told. In the lakes and rivers and oceans, a few fish multiply into millions of fish.

I merely point this out in passing, for our purpose this morning is not to spend time worrying about the actuality of the details in the story, but rather to see what the story has to say to us; to see the truth carried within the story. And more than anything else this story is an illustration of what can happen when we turn our resources, no matter how small or large, over to God, to be used for his purposes. It's a story which gives us some clues as to how we can help miracles happen.

I. The situation

In many ways our situations are like those of the dis-ciples. They had just returned from a successful mission on which Jesus had sent them and were proud of what they had accomplished. But now something new and unexpected and unwanted confronted them — a crowd of hungry people and the disciples were stumped as to what to do. Besides that, they were tired and wanted to get away from it all.

Well, none of us lives long in this world without dis-covering that new, unusual, unexpected, and unwanted problems and situations often confront us. Things move along smoothly for a while. We are busy working and planning and having some success. All is well. We think we've earned a little rest and relaxation and then sudden-ly we come smack up against an unusual problem; something comes into our life we hadn't anticipated. People make new demands on us, or someone we counted on lets us down, or something we had planned on falls through. Whatever it is that happens, we wonder, "How will we manage? Where can we buy bread to take care of the situation we hadn't planned on?"

We don't ordinarily face crowds of hungry people, but our problems can seem just as insurmountable or more so. Added to these are the problems and issues facing society. We look at the world situation; we listen to the news and wonder if there's really anything we can do as in-dividuals or churches. The problems seem so large and complex — peace in Vietnam, inflation, racial conflict, prison riots, inadequate housing for the poor, millions of hungry people in the world. Our resources seem small. Like the disciples in the story, all of us have asked and still ask — "How can we get bread to feed these people?"

It is about helping such miracles happen that this story speaks to us.

What was the first reaction of the disciples? "Send the people away," they said to Jesus. And many times, when we look at our problems, the seemingly impossible and un-wanted situations we confront, that's what we want to do — send it away, push it aside, let someone else take care of it. We want to avoid the issue at all costs.

After all the disciples reasoned, "what can anyone expect of us with so many people to be fed?" The problem is much too large for us to handle. Besides, we've got enough other problems and don't need this one. Haven't we had this kind of reaction in the face of an unexpected and seemingly insurmountable problem? There's a story in the Old Testament which speaks to the same issue. The people of Israel were facing the Philistines and the giant Goliath had them scared. Who could handle him?

But in this story from the Bible, Jesus would not let the disciples send the people away. No, he said, this is your business — give them something to eat. And he says the same to us — this is your business, face the situation; just don't try to pass it off with excuses or avoid it. This is also your opportunity.

II. But the disciples, like many of us, were still not willing to confront the issue. So, their second reaction was to re-emphasize the greatness of the problem. Two- hundred dollars' worth of bread it would take to feed this many people. We don't have that kind of money. Also, they could not see any other way of solving the problem than by getting enough money and buying enough food.

This is one of our favorite devices in facing new and unusually large tasks or problems. We re-state the dif-ficulty, emphasize it, and consider only meeting the situation. Don't we at times all seem to thoroughly enjoy sitting back and repeating all the ills of the society, or the obstacles in our own lives. Repeat them, talk about them, tell ourselves and others how bad off things are. We want everyone to know that we are acquainted with the obstacles which confront us, as if that excuses us.

Many times, we are like the people in the chorus of the ancient Greek tragedies. The chorus never really did anything, it just waited around for the intermissions and repeated all the calamities over again. Then the honest to goodness actors would come back and try to work it out.

But Jesus would not let his disciples get away with this. "How many loaves have you?" He asked. What resources do you have for meeting the situation? What are the alternatives? There may be something here you hadn't counted on. There may be another way of getting at the solution to the problem.

At this point, the Gospel of John reports that a little boy stepped forward and offered his lunch of five loaves and two fish to the disciples so that they could give it to Jesus. Perhaps he overheard the conversation. But he didn't stop to think about whether it was enough or not. He wanted to help. He wanted to do something. This is the kind of faith that miracles are made of. He gave all he had.

So often we think we have so little to offer that there's no use in even mentioning it. It won't be missed anyway. Maybe other people had small lunches in the crowd, but thought, "What's the use of sharing what I have, it's so little that it will hardly be enough for me." That kind of outlook is present in many places. Many there are who think they have no talent, nothing much to offer in helping along a cause or solving a problem. This is a fallacy which has disastrous consequences. The largest problems are often solved through the undistinguished services of people with only 5 loaves and two fish.

What makes a church congregation like this one effective is the contribution of many people, their skills, their talents, their money, and each must bring what he has. When this happens, God's multiplication takes over and miracles occur!

The disciples, however, felt as we many times do. They looked at the five loaves and two fish, then looked at the large crowd, and immediately decided it wasn't enough. To be sure those five loaves and two fish in their hands alone would not be enough to feed the crowd; but taking inventory, discovering our resources, is the place to begin. But then what?

Jesus took the loaves! Here's the secret! Here's the turning point in the story. You see, we sometimes feel as the disciples felt when we face our own problems with our own meager resources because we think we must handle them all by ourselves. We think the world depends on us alone. We forget about God. We forget about others. Our vision is limited.

The story is told that Martin Luther used to fall into fits of deep despondency and melancholy when the fortunes of the Lutherans at times reached low levels in their struggles with Rome. On one such occasion, his wife appeared at breakfast in mourning and when Luther inquired who had died, she replied, "God." Completely taken aback, he protested she was fooling. But his wife insisted that his deep depression she could explain only on such grounds, so she decided to go into mourning for God. Luther took the hint and ceased to act as though God were dead and the whole church and world depended on him alone.

The disciples had let the power of God and the power of the faith and resources of others out of their thinking. They forgot they were with Jesus. They saw only the five loaves and two fish, the large crowd and themselves. Looking at the situation in this way, they had reason to be afraid.

But Jesus took the loaves! The story says to us — don't just look to one answer to a problem. Look around you. Look at your resources, see what you have to offer, and no matter how little it is, and how big the problem seems, put what you have into the hands of Christ.

You see, this morning I am in large measure preaching to myself. For in this new situation, we face together as I accept the call to become your co-worker, I do not come to you as any kind of miracle worker, I ONLY come bringing my resources, my five loaves and two fish, plus my wife and three children. I hope you will bring to this con-gregation and to our life together, whatever resources you have, and then together we can put them into the hands of Christ. We can then help miracles happen and they will.

Also note that after Jesus took the five loaves and two fish from the disciples, he asked the people to sit down in small groups. Here we see the common sense of Jesus. People sitting in small groups do not shove or push. This too has something to say to us. It says, when you face a difficult situation, don't panic. Don't cast about for quick remedies. Don't think you can solve the world's problems or your own or the churches just by frantic activity, by rushing around, by pushing and shoving.

I once knew a man who oversaw directing emergency help in disaster situations like when a hurricane or other calamity hits an area. His wisdom was shown in that when he first arrived, he did not immediately begin rushing around with frantic activity. He would first quietly and methodically survey the whole situation and then after he had the total picture in his mind, he would begin to direct the clean-up.

After we have used what resources we have, there is then also a time for trustful waiting. And then miracles often happen.

Remember Jesus did not feed the crowd without the human instrument. The bread did not just fall from nowhere. He began with what the little boy gave him. And he begins only when we offer what we have to him to work with. If we hold back, we may be hampering his work.

What resources do you have? Maybe a lot, and for some maybe not many? Five loaves? Two fish? Perhaps it doesn't seem like much, but each one of us can help miracles happen.

I look forward to our life together! Amen.