Sunday, August 5, 1990
HELPING MIRACLES HAPPEN
Matthew 14:13-21

We don't often think of ourselves as being able to take part in miracles, but it does happen and sometimes quite unexpectedly. Here's a story from the New Testament that tells us how we can be a part of helping miracles happen.

It was early in the day, and Jesus had received some bad news, so he asked his disciples to go with him to a place where he could be away from the crowds. The bad news was that his friend, the man who baptized him, John the Baptist, had been killed by Herod. After burying the body, the followers of John the Baptist had reported his death to Jesus.

Unfortunately, he didn't get much time alone to grieve over the death of his friend. The crowds that had been following Jesus discovered where he had gone and soon caught up with him.

Jesus saw their despair. The story reports, "He had compassion on them and healed their sick." 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 or more so. So they suggested to Jesus that he take a break and send the people away to the nearest villages and farms to get food.

However, Jesus surprised them by saying, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

But how? The disciples didn't have any food with them. Nor did they have enough money to go into a town and buy the necessary food. And they couldn't have carried enough food back for that large a crowd even if they had the money.

Jesus persisted. He asked them to take inventory. Ask a few of the people close by if they have any food with them. In other words, don't make excuses so quickly. Discover what the alternatives are.

This story is in all four New Testament Gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — with one minor difference. The Gospel of John says that at this point a small boy came forward and offered his lunch of five loaves and two fish. Thus the disciples reported to Jesus, "We have five loaves and two fish, but what is that among so many?"

Jesus said, "Bring them here to me." Next, Jesus did something that showed his wisdom. He asked the people to sit down in small groups. He grouped them together into smaller communities where they could more easily relate to each other on a personal basis. And when you're sitting, you can't push and shove. Then, taking the five loaves and two fish, he asked God's blessing, broke the loaves and fish into smaller pieces, and asked the disciples to begin distributing the food. It was a kind of communion service.

Here's what I think happened next, and if it did, it's a bigger miracle than Jesus multiplying the food. Being seated in smaller groups and seeing the little boy's willingness to let his food be eaten by others, many people began to follow that example.

What a miracle it was for Jesus, with the little boy's help, to turn a large restless crowd into a community of loving people who were now willing to share their food with others. Jesus used the boy's gift to turn selfish men and women into giving people.

Remember earlier when Jesus began his ministry, he had been tempted to turn the stones of the desert into bread to feed the hungry people all around him, and he resisted the temptation. It would be better, he knew, to teach people to feed themselves, to share what they had with others. And so he put that lesson to use right here.

How then does this story apply today to many of the problems we face as Christians who want to make the world better?

Note first that when Jesus asked the disciples for help in feeding the people, there were two different kinds of responses. One was: "It's too big a problem. It can't be done. Even though there's a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish, what are they among so many?" Don't we give that kind of response today also in the face of seemingly insurmountable problems? The other day, there was a news report on television that 40,000 children die each day from hunger-related diseases. We have enough food in this world to feed everyone, but as has been noted many times before, there is a distribution problem. We have not yet discovered how to get the food to the people who need it. There was enough food in the crowd that day for everyone to be fed, but there was a distribution problem. With the little boy's gift in hand, Jesus went to work on the distribution problem.

We look at the world, we listen to the news, and see a steady stream of images of misery in our world — homeless ones huddled by a doorway; elderly people with vacant looks on their faces in nursing homes; children and adults killed by guns; victims of natural disasters — earthquakes and floods.

Don't you wonder sometimes, in the face of such need, what you can do to help? And then we tell ourselves, "I've got my own life to live. What are five barley loaves and two fish among so many?" The problem is so big, and I have so little to offer that there's no use in even mentioning it. It won't be missed.

But the second response to Jesus' request for help came not from the disciples but from that little boy who shyly offered his lunch to one of the disciples so that it could be given to Jesus. His young mind could not yet comprehend the immensity of the problem. He simply offered what he had in faith. He wanted to help. He wanted to do something. This is the kind of faith that helps miracles happen. He gave what he had. Remember too, he gave all that he had. He didn't hold any back for himself. He was not a stingy giver. He did what he could. It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.

I like to imagine that the young lad had begged his mother for permission to go see Jesus and that she had perhaps told him that he was too young to understand what Jesus would be talking about. But he had kept pestering her, and in the end, she had given him his way; and making up a little bundle of food, enough to see him through the day, she let him go. Perhaps standing as near to Jesus as he could, he had overheard the disciples talking with Jesus about the problem of food. It was then that he generously offered his little bundle of food to the disciples.

Can you imagine the story he had to tell his parents that night when he got home, with his eyes shining and his cheeks on fire — of the miracle that he and Jesus had performed? He understood the message of Jesus better than anyone.

The main point to be remembered from this story is one I've already emphasized, but it needs repeating again and again. Do not hold back your help because you are afraid it won't be enough. If you can't do everything, at least do something. Bring and give what you have. Never underestimate what your gift or skill can do, especially with God's help.

Last December, this church opened the Day Watch Hospitality Center for the homeless in downtown Lincoln, based exactly on this kind of faith. We would do what we could. We couldn't solve the hunger problem. We couldn't solve the housing problem. But one thing we could do was offer a place for homeless people to gather during the day in a friendly and safe environment. We had a small gift of money from someone in the congregation to begin with and had no idea where the rest of the money would come from. We weren't even sure what it would cost day by day to keep a place open. But support has continued to be there in terms of money and volunteers, and the ministry continues.

When we started our outreach ministry through television a few years ago, we also had no idea where the money would come from. We didn't know what commercial television we could get on, if any. We only knew that we had an inspiring worship service to offer to people who were not able to be here with us in person on Sunday mornings. It was an act of faith on this congregation's part.

We continue to be on the air because of the gifts of the members of this church, and we also get, from time to time, small and large gifts from those who are watching. Someday, someone will send us a large gift, or we will be remembered in the will of someone who died, and the ministry will continue. We said that we would never beg for money on the television program, and we haven't, but we continue to be grateful to those who send their money to help.

This story from the Bible tells us that when we do what we can to help, when we give what we have, as did the little boy in the story, God takes our little bit and makes it into something we hadn't imagined.

A nine-year-old girl once read about Dr. Albert Schweitzer's work in Africa. She wanted to help. She had enough money to buy one bottle of aspirin. She wrote to the Air Force and asked if they could fly over Dr. Schweitzer's hospital and drop the bottle down to help him. A radio station broadcast the story about this little girl's concern for helping others. Others responded as well.

Eventually, four and one-half tons of medical supplies worth over $400,000 were sent to Dr. Schweitzer's hospital, freely given by thousands of people. When Dr. Schweitzer heard the story, he said, "I never thought one child could do so much."

Years ago in Philadelphia, a little girl came to Sunday School and asked to be taken into one of the classes. The classes were full, and the church was so small that there seemed to be no place for her. Her desire to find a place in that Sunday School fired her with zeal to see the church made larger, to provide room for more children like herself.

Without speaking to anyone, she began to save pennies to help build that bigger church. Not too long after, the little girl died, but under her pillow was found an old red pocketbook in which

were 57 pennies and a scrap of paper on which was written the reason why she was saving her pennies.

The minister who conducted the funeral told the story of those 57 pennies, and it got into the newspapers. What could a little girl's 57 pennies do? They did a lot.

The tide of gifts which her example inspired flowed with increasing strength, and in six years, the 57 pennies had become $250,000, which became the nucleus of yet grander things, for the Baptist Temple with its Good Samaritan Hospital, and the great Temple University with its thousands of students, have come into being as the marvelous harvest of that little girl's gift of 57 pennies.

The miracle of five loaves and two fish happens over and over again because we do what we can do and give what we have. How can you help in any situation? Even though you can't do everything, you can at least do something, and many times, miracles happen.

Last week, I was looking through the sermons I have preached in this church over the past almost nineteen years and discovered that the first sermon I ever preached here was on September 19, 1971. On the previous Sunday, the congregation had voted in a special meeting to issue a call to me to become its Senior Minister. It was an unusual situation because the congregation voted on faith. The only people who had met me in person were the members of the search committee. Thus on the following Sunday — on September 19th — it was my privilege to be here with you, officially accept the call, and to preach the sermon.

In looking back, I noticed that I used this same story of the feeding of the crowd as the text. Part of what I said on that occasion was that in accepting the call, I would be coming among you as a co-worker, not as some kind of miracle worker. I said I would be coming bringing my resources, whatever skills and gifts I had — my five loaves and two fish — and that I hoped you would bring to this congregation and to our life together whatever resources you had, and then together we would put them in the hands of Christ. And that if we did this, God would multiply and miracles would happen.

I believe that when we give what we have, when we do our best, miracles will continue to take place in the ministries of this congregation and in many other places as well. Amen.