

## **Sermons at St. Luke's**

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, August 7, 2011.*

(Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33)

We often overlook the minor miracles. The major miracles get so much more attention. Last week we heard about Jesus feeding 5,000 men plus women and children with five loaves of bread and two fish, and we've just heard in the Gospel about Jesus walking on the water and these feats are surely impressive. I've always wanted to walk on water. When I was younger and was going to the Episcopal camp and conference center known as The Summit if you go to the waterfront, those of you who have been there, you remember there was a list of rules and the first one said "No swimming without a lifeguard," etc. and then the last one said, "No walking on the water." I always wanted to break that rule. Sometimes I would even go down to the dock and I would stick my foot out over the water and I would say, "Just this once." Hadn't happened yet, but maybe one day.

I might have done better though to be more mindful of the minor miracle in today's Gospel reading. Between feeding the 5,000 and walking on the water, between these dazzling displays, Jesus does something much quieter, but perhaps just as impressive and amazing. He prays. Just after everyone has eaten their fill of the loaves and the fishes, Matthew continues the story this way. "Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain to pray." Jesus dismisses the crowds and goes up on the mountain to pray, and I call that a minor miracle because Jesus has been trying to pray all day.

A few paragraphs earlier in the story Jesus hears the tragic news that his cousin, the prophet, John the Baptist, has been beheaded, and Matthew tells us that Jesus goes off in a boat by himself to a deserted place, presumably to pray, to be in the presence of God, to wonder what it mean now that his cousin, the prophet, is dead. "What does that mean for me, oh, God?" But the crowds get wind of Jesus' plan and arrive at the deserted place on foot ahead of him, and we heard in last week's Gospel how Jesus actually has compassion on the crowds and cures their sick and then performs this feeding miracle. But if it had been me, I would have turned my boat around and gone in the other direction. I mean, from my point of view, they've ruined Jesus' day off.

But thankfully, Jesus is more compassionate than me. He puts aside his prayer time and he cares for the people and ministers to them. And at the end of the day, having cured the sick and fed the hungry, it would have been easy for Jesus just to spend the rest of the day schmoozing with the crowd and his disciples, they could have sat around reminiscing over the miracle and basking in the glory. But Jesus sends the disciples away in the boat and then he dismisses the crowds and then he finally gets that time alone with God. And I call it a minor miracle because I don't know how he did it. I mean, Jesus was one man and there were 5,000 men plus women and children. He didn't have a bullhorn, he didn't have a big sign. I mean, what did he say to get all those people to leave him alone? "Show's over, folks." I mean, it would have been nice if he had had

someone to say, "Jesus has left the building." I don't know how he did it. The fact that he was able to get those people to leave him alone is amazing in itself.

And it sounds impressive to many of us because it's hard to find time for prayer. Now, we may not have a crowd of 5,000 to contend with, but a bunch of us have a crowd of Facebook friends posting their latest pictures and updates just wanting to get our attention. And we may not have a crowd of sick and hungry people right at our door, but the sick and the hungry and the suffering of the world are coming into our homes via the television and the Internet. We hear the call for help, we constantly hear the need for assistance. Our lives are crowded with many demands on our time and our energy. We might wake up in the morning hoping for a little bit of prayer time, a little focused God moment, but then the phone rings, the e-mail arrives, the news grabs our attention, a child needs breakfast, an aging parent needs something, we have to get to the doctor or take out the trash or get to soccer practice or the boss has an urgent request and our time to just be with God is gone. And at the end of the day, there's a crowd of laundry to be folded or dishes to be done or a crowded sporting event to watch and then it's time for bed and we're so worn out by how much has been crowded into our day that we just want to sleep. Maybe tomorrow we'll find that time alone with God.

You can see why I call it a minor miracle that Jesus is able to dismiss the crowds, to send his disciples away, to get himself up on the mountain to pray. I'm sure there must have been some more sick people to cure. Jesus could have gotten in the boat with the disciples just to make sure they got across the lake safely. He could have spent the rest of his day responding to other people's needs. But Jesus draws the line. His actions say, "Enough, enough." And that's a word that many of us find very hard to say.

I think Jesus was actually pretty clever about it though. If you look carefully at the story, he sent the disciples away first because they had been dying to get away from the crowds from the get-go. And if he had sent the crowds away first, then the disciples, well, they would have wanted to hang out. They would have been like, "Jesus, we just fed 5,000 people plus women and children. It's Miller time!" Jesus draws the line. He needs to pray, to focus on being with God who is the source of power and love and life. In the wake of the Prophet John's death, in the aftermath of a feeding miracle and in preparation for what is coming ahead, Jesus makes the time to rest and return to God in prayer.

It's an example that many of us find hard to follow. I mean, there are days when I feel like it would be easier to walk on the water than to make room for a few moments of silence and stillness alone with God. I know, though, that in order to continue doing God's work in the world, we have to find time to rest in God's presence. Would Jesus have been able to have compassion on the crowds or cure the sick or feed the hungry or take a prophet's place and stand up to the powerful if he had not been constantly checking in, so to speak, with God? Our good works and the courage and the strength it takes to do them flow from our connection with God, although sometimes it's tempting to let our good works crowd our lives so that prayer and worship become an afterthought rather than a first thought.

How do we dismiss the crowds then so we can pray and reconnect? Now, there are lots of practical steps and tips that we can take. Whether we're trying to develop a habit of prayer or

exercise or whatever, there are lots of helpful tips. You can pray first thing in the morning, first thing, or the last thing before you go to bed, set an alarm that reminds you to pray through the day, set aside a special place to pray in your house or somewhere you can go on your lunch break. Doesn't have to be a mountain top, by the way. And whenever you succeed in making that time for prayer, give yourself a reward. Go out for ice cream. I could go on and on with the practical tips, but the better news, though, the Gospel is that Jesus is not just a self-help salesman with a book and a blog. Jesus is the one sent to show us who we can be with God's help. The practical hints are fine, but it is God who is our strength. We want to dismiss the crowds and pray. The good news is that God is able to perform that minor miracle in our lives. Through Jesus Christ and membership in his church, we have access to grace and power and peace beyond ourselves. Grace and power and peace that can help us to dismiss the crowds and pray.

Speaking of the church, I heard our bishop, Michael Curry, give a short reflection on this week's Gospel via Youtube on the Internet. I don't know if you're aware that our bishop puts out this weekly E-newsletter called Please Note and you can sign up for it on the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina website. And every week he has an interview with someone or a reflection that he's done on a little video. And this week he was focusing on the Gospel lesson today, and he was talking about the major miracle, walking on the water. And what struck Bishop Curry was how for a moment the disciple Peter was able to walk on the water with Jesus before he got distracted by the storm, before he got afraid by the wind and the waves. By focusing on Jesus and responding to his invitation to come out on the water, Peter was able to do something amazing. How do we dismiss the crowds? How do we find the miraculous prayer time that we need in order to have true compassion? We focus on Christ. We ask him again and again to call us up on that mountain with him

Psalm 105 which we read this morning says it well. "Search for the Lord and his strength; continually seeking his face." The first and the last step in getting ourselves to pray is to fix our focus on the one who teaches us to pray in the first place. Follow him. Yesterday in our church calendar was the Feast of the Transfiguration. Our calendar sets aside this day to celebrate when Jesus took three of his disciples up on a mountain to pray and was revealed to be the shining son of God. Remembering that feast and remembering the minor miracle in today's Gospel, we humbly ask God to call us up on the mountain. Let us pray: "Oh God, oh Christ, help us enter into your presence. Perform a minor miracle daily in our lives that we may dismiss the crowds for a time and seek your shining face in prayer. In returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and trust, we shall find our strength to feed the hungry, to bind the broken, to comfort the frightened. All in your most holy name, Amen."