Miracles CAN happen!
(If we organize like Jesus did.)
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sarah Hedgis
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – August 2, 2020

Isaiah 55:1-5

“All you who are thirsty,
come to the water!
You who have no money,
come, buy food and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk,
without money, without price!
Why spend your money for what is not bread,
your wages for what fails to satisfy?
Heed me, and you will eat well,
you will delight in rich fare;
bend your ear and come to me,
listen, that you may have life:
I will make an everlasting Covenant with you—
in fulfillment of the blessings promised to David.
See, I have made of you to be a witness to the
peoples,
a leader and commander of the nations.
See, you will summon nations you never knew,
and nations that never knew you will come hurrying
to you—for the sake of YHWH, the Holy One of Israel,
who will glorify you.”

Psalm 145: 8-9, 15-22

8 You are gracious and full of compassion, *
slow to anger and of great kindness.
9 You are loving to everyone, *
and your compassion is over all your works.
15 You uphold all those who fall; *
you lift up those who are bowed down.
16 The eyes of all wait upon you, O God, *
and you give them their food in due season.
17 You open wide your hand *
and satisfy the needs of every living creature.
18 You are righteous in all your ways *
and loving in all your works.
19 You are near to those who call upon you, *
to all who call upon you faithfully.
20 You fulfill the desire of those who fear you; *
you hear their cry and help them.
21 You preserve all those who love you, *
but you destroy all the wicked.
22 My mouth shall speak your praise, O God; *
let all flesh bless your holy Name for ever and ever.

Romans 9:1-5

I speak the truth in Christ; I am not lying—my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit that there is great
grief and constant pain in my heart. Indeed, I would cut myself off from Christ if that would save my sisters and
brothers, my kinfolk—the Israelites. Theirs were the adoption as God’s children, the glory, the covenants, the Law-
giving, the worship and the promises; theirs was the ancestry, and from them came the Messiah—at least, according
to human ancestry. Blessed forever be God who is over all! Amen.
Matthew 14:13-21

When Jesus heard about the beheading, he left Nazareth by boat and went to a deserted place to be alone. The crowds heard of this and followed him from their towns on foot. When Jesus disembarked and saw the vast throng, his heart was moved with pity, and he healed their sick. As evening drew on, the disciples approached Jesus and said, “This is a deserted place and it is already late. Dismiss the crowds so they can go to the villages and buy some food for themselves.” Jesus said to them: “There is no need for them to disperse. Give them something to eat yourselves.” “We have nothing here,” they replied, “but five loaves and a couple of fish.” “Bring them here,” Jesus said. Then he ordered the crowds to sit on the grass. Taking the five loaves and two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven, blessed the food, broke it, and gave it to the disciples, who in turn gave it to the people. All those present ate their fill. The fragments remaining, when gathered up, filled twelve baskets. About five thousand families were fed.
Our gospel reading today is the miracle of Jesus feeding 5,000+ people. The miracle of there being more than enough.

Sister Simone Campbell has one of my favorites takes on this text, which is that the work of making much out of little - stretching food so everyone can eat - is only a miracle for those who have never had to do it.

Her interpretation comes from her decades-long work to end poverty. Work that tells us, for example, that from 1980-2015, the top 5% of income earners experienced a 100.6% increase in income while the lowest 20% income category actually experienced a 9% decline in income. That, as of 2016, white family wealth was seven times greater than Black family wealth and five times greater than Latino family wealth - interconnecting poverty racism. Do you know that it has been 4,029 days since the minimum wage was last increased?! For 4,029 days, the federal government has said it is acceptable to pay people $7.25 an hour?! Despite the ever-increasing wealth gap, all of our research also shows that those with fewer resources establish make-shift ways to care for their communities and give at higher percentages than the richest 1%.

When it comes to the state of income inequality in our country, and all other systems of oppression, it feels like we need a miracle. I think miracles could happen, just like our story from Matthew, if we're willing to organize ourselves like Jesus did.

We are all aware of the ways mainstream Christianity has whitewashed and downplayed Jesus’ teachings, blunting his message to one that asks us to more or less do our best at being good, nice people. Just like we've settled for the presentation of miracles as magic tricks.

But Jesus’ ministry was a revolutionary movement. People left their homes, their cities, their entire lives to follow him. This would not have happened if he did not have clearly articulated goals and ideals to share with them. Jesus’ ministry was a revolutionary movement so successful that he was executed by the state. This would not have happened if he did not use effective strategies that led to miraculous things, extraordinary things - as in outside of the ordinary, outside of the status quo.

When Jesus healed and fed; when he taught the disciples to pray and even when he walked on water, Jesus was not doing spontaneous problem-solving or relying on holy charisma. These actions were the movement too. Organized around a commitment to loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself - or, as Obery Hendricks puts it, “[to] treat your neighbors and their needs as holy”.

Here is Hendrick's take on this miracle: Jesus didn't just teach a different way, he demonstrated it, too. Jesus had just finished teaching the crowds about what the kingdom of heaven is like. With his feeding of the hungry crowd in [Matthew 14], he put his teachings into practice.

When the disciples say Jesus needs to send the crowds home so they can take care of themselves, Jesus says, “There's no need to send them away. You give them something to eat.” He is demonstrating the difference between the old way and his way.

[1]https://networkadvocates.org/21stcenturypoverty/assets/
The disciples respond with the answer from the old way of doing things: “We have nothing here except five loaves of bread and two fish.” Hmm. We could spend an entire sermon on what’s unspoken here. It’s more than, “we don’t have enough for them”; it’s also “we only have enough for us.”

But Jesus says, “Bring them here to me.” With this, Jesus demonstrated the falsity of that thinking.

“He ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. He took the five loaves of bread and the two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them and broke the loaves apart and gave them to his disciples. Then the disciples gave them to the crowds. Everyone ate until they were full, and they filled twelve baskets with the leftovers. About five thousand men plus women and children had eaten.”

Jesus showed that the difference between feeding the poor and hungry and not feeding them is simply one of choice. Needs can be met if a society and those who govern it see their responsibility as giving rather than taking. By feeding the hungry crowd, Jesus gave the people the opportunity to experience what his new way meant in practice. He did not lobby or try to persuade them of the abstract or the speculative. He did not lament their hunger or promise to do something about it, he simply fed them. Jesus made it clear that the kin-dom of God is not a matter of talk, but of action.

Demonstrating the alternative gives people something to hold on to. It also gives credibility to a movement and its leaders in that it shows where a movement’s true heart lies.5

In this divine economy, the haves care for the have-nots, the rich for the poor; those who have bread share with those who have none; those in power are obligated to do their best to fulfill the needs of those entrusted to their care; those who profess to represent God concentrate on giving to the people rather than on getting what they can from them6...For Jesus, this is what it meant to love your neighbor as yourself: to give what the neighbor needs in the same way and for the same reason that God gives—simply because the neighbor needs it. Here Jesus modeled the kin-dom of God in action.7

To sum up Hendricks’ powerful reading of this miracle and its role in Jesus’ movement: don’t just explain the alternative, show it.8

So, how do we show it? Especially right now.

COVID-19 has changed our world in ways we don’t even fully understand yet, while also exposing, in a new and mainstream way, the systems of oppression and pain that existed long before: white supremacy, militarism, poverty. So perhaps, the idea of talking about how much God will provide for us, in the midst of so much suffering and uncertainty, sounds like too much. And showing it? That may feel pretty impossible.

As you hold this pain, remember Jesus’ ministry didn’t take place outside of suffering.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus has just learned that Herod executed John the Baptist. It’s likely he was mourning the death of his friend, the kind of friend you don’t need to spend much time with to love them; they get you and you get them.

He also realizes that John’s death signals a new level of threat for Jesus and his followers. In fact, Herod thinks Jesus is John the Baptist resurrected. Jesus’ movement is growing and succeeding. The disruption of the status quo moves closer to the kingdom’s goal but also his own crucifixion. So we’ve got to remember that when those eager crowds showed up to follow him, Jesus was thick in his own mess.

5 Ibid., 181-182.
6 Ibid., 180.
7 Ibid., 182.
8 Ibid., 178.
Jesus led a movement as someone who was traumatized politically and religiously. His miracles were not above trauma; they came out of trauma. His experience of empire guided how he understood what was going on and how he worked to establish a new way.

And it is here - in the midst of teaching about God's kin-dom while also experiencing the trauma of his own life and people - that a miracle happens. Miracles do not ignore our pain. They are born out of it.

Now, one of the things I’ve tried to raise this morning is that miracles aren't magic tricks. Miracles go against nature, yes. They elude explanation, yes.

But now we’re back to Sister Simone: In a country where 37 million people go hungry while 40% of our food supply is wasted each year, of course we can't explain or imagine how Jesus and his disciples fed so many with so little. To even try, we'd need to value and lift up those who have continued that ministry, who live out the prerogative of the Jesus movement. That's what is so powerful about the revived Poor People's Campaign - ask poor people how to end poverty; listen to BIPOC's experiences; protect trans people; believe women. Center these experiences - imagine these are the ones with divine agency.

Anyway, what I’m trying to say is that miracles rely on more than a wing and a prayer. Jesus' miracles involved strategy, imagination, action, and healing. And if Jesus needed skills to usher in the kin-dom of God, we probably need some too.

So I want to share a few skills, specifically for facing transition, from Bruce Feiler, who wrote Life is in the Transitions. Feiler says we can't control the disruptions in our lives, and these disruptions make us feel frightened, overwhelmed, and stuck. “Transition,” he says, “is how we get unstuck. We must choose to take the steps and go through the process of turning our fear and anxiety into renewal and growth.” Here are his five tips for doing that:

1. Recognize your transition superpowers: Do you find meaning in the messy? Are you motivated by new habits? Can you recognize when it’s time to shut a door or start with a clean slate? Start with your superpower.
2. Identify and address your emotions. Feiler found that 8 out of 10 people trying to cope with emotions turn to rituals, even and especially if that means creating new ones.
3. Shed something: “Like animals who molt when they enter a new phase, we cast off parts of our personalities or old habits...Shedding is a way to clear out some unwanted parts of our lives to make way for the new parts to come.”
4. Try something creative: In the face of chaos, humans create. The St. Peter's talent show - 'nuf said.
5. Finally, rewrite your life story. We spend our lives revising and retelling our stories, and it’s our choice how we do that. Feiler encourages, “We should see these moments for what they are: healing periods that take the frightened parts of our lives and begin to repair them.”

That sounds like a miracle to me.

I do not know what else we will face. In this extended season of global and individual transitions, St. Peter's is here for you. To love on you and also to remind you: Like the disciples and the crowds and Jesus himself, we have a choice.

Christ invites us to choose to respond from our pain; continues Jesus' movement; face disruption in order to find growth and healing; to not just talk about loving God and neighbor but to strategize and organize ourselves around this commitment.

I believe the kin-dom of God is incomplete without you. And, more than that, I believe God wants you to feel alive to the kin-dom of God around us, longs for you to have your own experience of it to hold onto.

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As today's final blessing says,
you are
part of the path
this blessing makes:
it creates a way
not only for you
but through you
and in you,
that it finds its road
as you find yours.

May it be so. Amen.