

‘THERE ARE MIRACLES WAITING TO HAPPEN!’

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Elkton United Methodist Church  
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Pledge Sunday

II Corinthians 9:6-15

John 6:1-14

In less than two weeks’ time, we’ll be celebrating Thanksgiving, and if my suspicions are correct, some of you already have your shopping list made out, right? I mean, Thanksgiving dinner is like unto no other. It’s a full-on feast, which means a lot of planning and coordination goes into it

So, imagine yourself on Thanksgiving morning, everything all lined up, all your plans ready to go, and your college son or daughter shows up at the front door of your house with all of the residents of the dorm in which he or she lives! “Sorry Mom, sorry Dad, but they didn’t have anywhere else to go!” What in the world would you do?

Have you ever found yourself facing something insurmountable like that? I hope not, but let me tell you about one time when I did. It happened years ago, early in my ministry. I was serving as the Chairperson of the Division of Worship for our Annual Conference, and one of the responsibilities of the division was planning and carrying out all of the worship services for the Annual Conference sessions.

Well, if you know me, you know that I’m a planner and organizer. So I went about planning and carrying out those services just like everything else I do – making lists, delegating tasks, checking and checking again to make sure everything is good to go. And imagine, of course, the pressure I felt as a young pastor trying to do everything just right for the Bishop.

Well, one of the tasks I took on for the opening service that year was getting communion ready to serve to probably 800 or so people. That meant gathering chalices, linens, servers and so on. And then there was the matter of the bread. Well, at that time I lived in Wilmington and there used to be a bakery in North Wilmington called Sweeneys. It had a great reputation, so I called them up and ordered fifteen loaves of unsliced white bread, which I would pick up early on the morning of the first day of conference, and then I would head off down to Princess Anne, Maryland where the conference was being held.

On the appointed morning, I woke up both nervous and excited, packed my car, and then headed off to Sweeneys to pick up the bread for that afternoon’s worship service. I walked into the door and was immediately surrounded by the wonderful smell of baking bread. I went up to the counter, told them I was there for my special order. The clerk went to the back room, and I waited. And I waited, and waited, and waited,

until finally the clerk came back and told me there was no bread there for me. In fact, they couldn't find an order recorded anywhere from me! And, bonus! They didn't have any bread ready for me to take!

You know, in that moment, I think I felt a little bit like Jesus on that mountain with thousands of people around him and no food to give them. I had no earthly idea what I was going to do. All I knew was that, hours from then, hundreds of people would be lining up to take communion, and I had nothing to give them.

Man, did I ever pray! I prayed like I had never prayed before. Then I got back in my car and made the world's longest drive to Princess Anne, because I stopped at every grocery store I could find looking for whole loaves of unsliced white bread. Well, I quickly discovered that was not going to happen, so I took any whole loaves of unsliced bread I could find.

And, thanks be to God, by the time I arrived at Princess Anne hours later I had the required number of loaves – fifteen of them – but only about three of them were white bread – the rest were all sorts of varieties – whole grain, pumpernickel, sour dough – you name it, I had it in that pile of bread. And when the time came, I set up the altar with all of the chalices of grape juice and these mounds of loaves of bread – and then I took a deep breath and relaxed.

And that's not the end of the story. After the service was over, I can't tell you the number of people who came up to me and thanked me for being so creative with the communion service. They thought that it was so wonderful that I placed bread from all over the world on the table, helping us celebrating the diversity of humanity! Talk about God making lemonade out of lemons!

Oh friends, you know what? God always makes a way. We see it in the Gospel lesson – one of the most famous stories in scripture – a story, by the way that is told by all four Gospel writers. That's pretty rare, which tells you what a profound lesson about God and giving that they wanted people to hear.

You heard it read. Jesus and his disciples were ministering to the crowds that had come from all around because they had heard and seen the amazing things Jesus had done. They wanted to be near him, to be healed by him, to watch him and listen to him. Jesus saw them coming, and turned to the disciples and asked "Where can we buy food for all of them?"

Can't you almost imagine the disciples gasping in disbelief? "Feed them? Feed all of them? There are thousands of them." Instead, one of them pointed out that it would take enormous amounts of money to feed all those people. And then, another one, Andrew, maybe trying to point out the futility of their task, said, "Well, Jesus, there's a little boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish – but that won't make a dent in it!" Well, Jesus took what that boy had to offer, told the crowd to sit down, gave thanks to

God for what they had, and then proceeded to feed the crowd – all of the crowd – more than five thousand of them – and . . . there were leftovers!

It was a miracle, no doubt! Ever since that day, people have tried to figure it out. Clearly, with God all things are possible, so in the hands of Jesus, there is no doubt that the food could multiply until there was enough and more. We've seen miracles like that happen ourselves – times and situations that looked impossible, and through the grace of God all was made well. There is nothing God cannot accomplish.

But the miracle might have happened in another way. Listen to the musings of another pastor who suggests that maybe the miracle was that the little boy opening his heart and giving all to Jesus, made the crowd do that as well. Here is how he imagines what might have happened on that hillside that day. He thinks Jesus might have brought the little boy over to himself and then turned to the crowd and said:

“See this little boy? He is offering to give us everything he's got, and I want you to see that. And then I'm going to break, up the bread and give thanks to God for it, and then start distributing it to all of you, and then you will . . . well, I don't know. Let's see what happens after that. Alright? Got it? Don't let me down. So now, bow your heads and I'm going to pray.” And he starts to pray.

And then, this pastor supposes, that “as the bits and pieces of food are handed down the aisle, one person starts to think to himself, ‘I know my wife made me a sandwich, and packed it for me, and I probably don't need all of it, so I'll break it in half and pass it down.’” And then the next guy remembers the biscuits he had tucked away for his journey in his satchel, and another remembers the cured meat he had with him to snack on . . . and so on, and so on.” (On-line, Stan Duncan, “So What Did He Do on That Mountain?” 2015)

Well, you see what might well have happened. That one little person, that little boy, and his willingness to give everything he had to help Jesus feed the people, stirred something in the hearts of the crowd, causing them to open up their hearts as well. And when they did, a miracle occurred.

It became a story of abundance, rather than scarcity; a story of what could be done, rather than what couldn't; a story of giving what you have and letting God do amazing things with it and through it.

There is, as I'm sure you've figured out, a reason I chose this passage to preach on for Pledge Sunday. Because it has so much to say to us as we prepare to make our financial pledges for 2020.

The first thing it says is that our giving is all about our hearts. It's all about the love we have for Jesus, and the commitment we have to work for the kingdom by his side. It is not primarily about dollar and cents, about the amount we give, it's primarily about

the love we have for Christ and our commitment to him. That little boy didn't have a lot to give, but of what he had, he gave it all. All.

A second thing it says about our giving is that through it we are intentionally partnering with God. We want to do all we can to bring God's kingdom on earth – to draw people to Christ, to help them grow in faith, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, welcome the stranger, care for the vulnerable and more. We give so that, with God, we can do His will in our church and in the world.

Thirdly, this story reminds us that, by ourselves, we can do little, but together we can do much. Each one of us does our part, but together, with God we can do mighty things. I talked to you about that last week – all the mighty things God has done with us and through our giving. None of us could accomplish those things alone, but together, with God, we have!

Finally, the story reminds us of the ripple effect of giving. You know that every one of those people on that hillside with Jesus left there amazed at what had happened. You know they couldn't wait to tell others about watching a miracle unfold right before their eyes! And it happened, because one little boy gave all he had.

When I think about the ripple effect of giving, my mind always goes back to that wonderful story of two families going to a circus that came to their town, a story told by a man named Dan Clark. Hear the story in his words:

“Once when I was a teenager, my father and I were standing in line to buy tickets for the circus. Finally, there was only one family between us and the ticket counter. This family made a big impression on me. There were eight children, all probably under the age of 12. You could tell they didn't have a lot of money. Their clothes were not expensive, but they were clean. The children were well-behaved, all of them standing in line, two by two behind their parents, holding hands. They were excitedly jabbering about the clowns, elephants and other acts they would see that night. One could sense they had never been to the circus before. It promised to be a highlight of their young lives.

The father and mother were at the head of the pack standing as proud as could be. The mother was holding her husband's hand, looking up at him as if to say, 'You're my knight in shining armor.' He was smiling and basking in pride, looking at her as if to reply, 'You got that right.'

The ticket lady asked the father how many tickets he wanted. He gently responded, 'Please let me buy eight children's tickets and two adult tickets so I can take my family to the circus.'

The ticket lady quoted the price.

The man didn't have enough money.

How was he supposed to turn and tell his eight kids that he didn't have enough money to take them to the circus?

Seeing what was going on, my dad put his hand into his pocket, pulled out a \$20 bill and dropped it on the ground. (We were not wealthy in any sense of the word!) My father reached down, picked up the bill, tapped the man on the shoulder and said, 'Excuse me, sir, this fell out of your pocket.'

The man knew what was going on. He wasn't begging for a handout but certainly appreciated the help in a desperate, heartbreaking situation. He looked straight into my dad's eyes, took my dad's hand in both of his, squeezed tightly onto the \$20 bill, and with his lip quivering and a tear streaming down his cheek, he replied, "Thank you, thank you, sir. This really means a lot to me and my family."

Dan concludes with these words: "My father and I went back to our car and drove home. We didn't go to the circus that night, but we didn't go without." (A 2<sup>nd</sup> Helping of Chicken Soup for the Soul, "The Circus," Dan Clark, p. 3)

As you make your pledge today, I invite you to think about two people – a little boy standing with Jesus, and a man standing in line at a circus. Neither one of them had a lot, but they gave fully and freely of what they did have, and God made something amazing happen!

Friends, there are miracles waiting to happen, yes, in and through our church. And we have the opportunity to partner with God to make them happen through our giving. So I pray that today, when you lay your pledge down before God, it will be a moment of joy, when you say to God, "Here, take what I am giving, and use it and me to make miracles happen in this church, through this church, and out in the world." May it be so.

Amen.