

SERMON: Proper 12B

John 6:1-21

Preached Sunday, July 26, 2009 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

My mother went to a family reunion a few weeks ago in Maggie Valley, not too far down the road. At this gathering, there was a celebrity of sorts: a cousin, Susan Helms, who is a NASA astronaut. In her five missions, Susan has been on the Space Shuttle, the International Space Station, and set the world record for the longest spacewalk. Some years ago, Mom & Dad travelled to Florida to witness a shuttle launch that carried this distant cousin of mine into space. At the family reunion, she sat and chatted and handed out official NASA photos for those who wanted them. Other than her claim to fame, Susan Helms acted like a normal person; just another member of the family.

All of this came to mind last week when we observed the 40th anniversary of the first American moon landing. I was six years old when Neil Armstrong first set foot on the moon. My siblings and I were asleep that night, but our parents woke us up so that we could watch the incredible sight on a black and white T.V. I don't remember much about it except the feeling that I was growing up in an amazing world — a world in which human beings could fly to and walk on the moon!

How many space flights have there been since then? I don't know, but we've had more than I can keep up with. Today, in the main hallway at Brevard Elementary School, there's a framed portrait with my cousin and the crew of her shuttle flight. Young school children walk by it every school day. There's no way to know exactly how they feel about human beings in space, but it's probably not as much an object of wonder as it was for me 40 years ago.

How long does it take before the amazing and wondrous becomes routine and commonplace? What does it mean for our faith that we live at a time when space flight and other marvels have become a normal part of American life?

In our Gospel reading today, we have the familiar stories of Jesus feeding the 5,000 and walking on the water. They were miraculous events the disciples remembered and told for the sake of those who followed them. These stories remind us who Jesus was and is, Son of Man and Son of the living God. Two thousand years later, we're challenged by the familiarity of these events — and perhaps also a lack of wonder as we hear them once again: "Jesus feeding the multitudes; got it. Jesus walking on the water; yup — been there, heard that, bought the T-shirt."

I've preached many sermons over the years on this subject. Some of you have

been here and heard “that”! So, this morning, I’m not going to talk about the nature of biblical miracles or their theological meaning. I want to stay away from what my son once referred to as “blah blah blah” preaching! Instead, I’d like to focus on the spiritual practice of cultivating wonder and gratitude.

Something miraculous happened that day when thousands were fed in the middle of nowhere. I have no doubt about that. There are two possible explanations: one is that it was a supernatural miracle; the other, that it was a miracle of generosity, as everyone shared what little they had with each other. As I stand before you today, however, I call this a miracle of abundance in the midst of apparent scarcity.

Notice how Jesus tests the disciples to see how they will react to the need to feed the people. Our patron, St. Philip, offers what I would call a normal human response: “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little” (v. 7). His friend, Andrew, is a little more hopeful, but not much: “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” (v. 9). With that as a set-up, Jesus goes to work. In the face of what appears to be a crisis-inducing lack of food, our Savior proceeds as if there were no scarcity. First, he has the people sit down for a meal. Then, and most importantly, he takes what is available and gives thanks for it. He takes what some would say is a measly five loaves and two fish, and offers thanks to God. When the food is distributed, somehow all the people eat their fill and there is plenty left over.

We hear this story at an interesting time in U.S. history. I don’t have to remind anyone about the recession we’re in. The normal human presumption is that we are living in a time of extreme scarcity. There’s not enough to go around, and it will be impossible for everyone’s needs to get met. That’s the mindset of scarcity. Meanwhile, here are some statistics I found the first place I looked:

- 9 million human beings starve to death each year.
- Some 35 million Americans are overweight and, at any given time, about 20 percent of all Americans are on diets.
- Americans spent \$236 billion eating out in 1990. In the same year, the U.S. spent \$1.6 billion on overseas food aid.
- The basic health and nutrition needs of the world’s poorest people could be met for an additional \$13 billion a year. Animal lovers in the United States and Europe spend more than that on pet food each year.*

So, in the face of such human need, which mindset is most likely to be helpful: one of scarcity, or one of abundance? Which one do you think God would want

us to have?

The stories we have in scripture help remind us that the world God has made is good, and that there is enough on the earth to meet basic human needs. These stories also remind us that we are showered with gifts and blessings every day. The tricky part is learning how to not take them for granted.

A woman named Carol decided she wanted to do something nice for her neighbor Mrs. Smith, so she baked a pie and carried it next door. When Mrs. Smith opened up her door, she was surprised to see her holding a pie. She replied, "For me? Oh, thank you so much! You just don't know how much I appreciate it! You are so thoughtful for doing this! Thank you!"

Because Mrs. Smith liked the pie so much, Carol decided the next week to bake her another one. When she took it over, Mrs. Smith opened the door and said, "Thank you so much. You are so kind!"

The following week, Carol took another pie next door. Mrs. Smith replied simply, "Thanks."

The next week brought another gift of another pie. Mrs. Smith responded, "You're a day late with that pie."

A week later, Carol baked her another pie. This time her neighbor said, "Try using a little more sugar, would you? And don't bake it quite so long. The crust has been a little bit hard lately. Next time, I'd like cherry instead of apple."

The next week Carol was so busy, she had no time to cook for her neighbor. When she passed by Mrs. Smith's house on the way to the store, Mrs. Smith looked through the window and noticed she didn't have a pie. She stuck her head out and yelled, "Hey, where's my pie?!?"

In response to this story, a wise person wrote:

"When we receive the same gifts every day, it's easy to stop noticing them for what they are. When we stop noticing, we stop appreciating. When we stop appreciating, we stop thanking. When we stop thanking, we start complaining."**

It's such a slow and subtle process, we don't notice it until our attitude has changed. If this goes unchecked, our souls begin to shrink through a lack of wonder and gratitude for our daily blessings. They are there for us when we take the time and the little bit of effort required to recognize them for what they are.

I wrote most of this sermon on a brief trip to visit Jayne's family in Blowing Rock. For much of the time, I had a panoramic view of the majestic Blue Ridge, including Grandfather Mountain. During the day, we saw hummingbirds zoom to and from the nectar waiting for them near the deck. At night, we watched as flying squirrels chased each other in the same spot, scampering for the peanuts set out for them. With the tap of a few keys on a laptop computer — connected wirelessly to the Internet — I was able to learn that the Appalachian range began forming a billion years ago. The mountains themselves beginning to emerge with the shifting of the continents, about three to four hundred million years ago. God's handiwork was evident long before human beings ever saw it, which finally happened some 9,000 years ago.

We were in Blowing Rock in part to see the baby daughter of our niece, the first great grandchild in either of our families. Jazmine is six months old and, like all babies, she is a wonder to behold. We did what most people do when there's a baby around: we sat watching her, marveling at the size of her fingers and toes, chuckling at her funny little facial expressions and body movements. Our son Will was the person most responsible for encouraging our visit. He relishes the fact that he's no longer the "baby" of the family, and now has a real live baby cousin. His joy was contagious, as I looked up from the computer screen, time and again.

While we were there, we also saw the new Harry Potter movie. We are big fans of the series, and I was probably as captivated by the movie as my children — in part because I could sense how enthralled they were. You don't have to read any of the books to understand that part of their appeal lies in the theme of enchantment. J.K. Rowling's fictional world is filled with mysterious forces and magical powers. Throughout their adventures, her characters are all learning how to make their way in a world filled with wonder.

Can we call any of this miraculous? In a way, Yes; and in another way, No. Our experiences are replicated millions of times by millions of people, so we can't claim that they're especially unique. But they do have the capacity to remind us that our world is enchanted for the simple reason that it is filled with God's handiwork. Babies, mountain ranges, moon walks, family gatherings, even the Internet. All of them bear the hidden presence of the divine because God is their ultimate Creator. Our faith reminds us that the Holy One sustains us and the universe with love — but we do need reminding. Our sense of wonder can wear off through repeated exposure. We forget that we can glimpse eternity through the window of everyday life.

A medieval German mystic once wrote, "The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw — and knew I saw — all things in God and God in all things."***
My sisters and brothers, let us grow into this knowledge together, urging each

other to recognize the abundant presence of God all around us. Let us pray, with Paul, that we may one day “have the power to comprehend ... what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:18–19).

AMEN.

*U. S. News and World Report, October 21, 1991. Final fact is from Bread for the World, found July 2009 at <http://www.bread.org/learn/hunger-basics/>

**Pie story from Kent Crockett, The 911 Handbook (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 157–158; concluding observation from Crockett’s, I Once Was Blind But Now I Squint (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2004), 160–161.

***Quoted in Barbara Brown Taylor, An Altar In the World (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), p. 1.