

Making bread without dough, Getting fish without net (July 29, 2018)

John 6:1-21

The term “miracle” is used broadly to describe and highlight something that has its nature and effects totally exceed our expectations, e.g. miracle drugs, or miracle babies. Nonetheless, the term “miracle” is also used to describe events that happen contrary to natural laws.

Have you ever watched the shows of Val Valentino, the masked magician who exposed the secrets behind numerous classic magic tricks? As we all know magic is not real, it's only an illusion. There're ways to know how magic tricks were performed. Miracle is however different. It belongs to a totally different category that does not just leave us with a feeling of awe but also a message which we can't always explain, or explain away.

This morning we are not reflecting on how to be a wonder worker or whether a miracle is possible at all; today's message is more about how Jesus valued what he did.

The gospel writer of John said, a great crowd was following Jesus because they saw the signs which Jesus did upon the sick people. “Semeion” is the word used by the writer to describe Jesus' miracles, which means "a sign". The meaning of a miracle does not end in itself. It has the function of a pointer, giving people a sense of direction: pointing to the destination and where the significance of a matter lies. When Jesus realized the crowd surrounding him got his message wrongly, he withdrew from them since he sensed that they were going to crown him as their king.

For Jesus, miracles must not be taken too seriously by itself. However, most people considered miracles as so important that they want it to become something tangible and be accessible at all times especially when they needed. If miracle were to be understood in this way, it would only deepen their tendency of dependency on miracle. How nice would it be having a leader who could make bread without a dough and fishing without a net? If Jesus came to us today, a lot of people would like him to be our prime minister, since he could do everything and there's no longer needs to negotiate with other countries to get better deals. However, Jesus refused to do that even before he started his ministry. In the wilderness Jesus was tempted to change stone into bread after fasting for 40 days and nights. His hunger made the temptation real and his supernatural power escalated the tempting portion of the temptation. Once Jesus started his ministry, temptations kept coming back to him, especially when similar needy environment arose, when Jesus was surrounded by a big crowd who were sincere, showed

their interest in him who can provide what they needed. It was not just Jesus being trapped in temptation, but also the crowd, his disciples as well as the readers like us.

There were more than five thousand people, men alone. Jesus playfully raised a question to Philip. He asked about the available source of food and Philip replied with a question. "How could they afford that?" It was not a simple answer of "No", but with a reasonable calculation and estimation. Yet, Jesus' question opened up Philip's mind to know the extent of the impossibility.

Jesus' question revealed that Christian faith embraces beliefs as well as doubts. We know there's a boundary between a possible mission and an impossible mission, but we also should know that the boundary is not rigid since it could be changed.

Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, mentioned something that did not appear to be helpful in solving the problem. He said there was a little boy who had five barley loaves and two fish. Andrew didn't seem to treasure that when he said, "But what are they among so many people?" How did Andrew know about that boy and what he carried with him? Did the boy offer to give his food to all the people there? It doesn't say in the Bible. Yet Andrew made a good remark. Unexpectedly Jesus took the food and distributed it among the crowd. Jesus wanted to show that food was enough for all and nothing should be wasted.

Sometimes we get stuck in questions like whether Jesus did that miracle and multiplied the food, or whether the crowd simply started to share their own food amongst themselves. Instead of drawing a clear boundary between things that could happen naturally, and things that are against the natural law, it's more beneficial to know that setting that boundary might not be helpful. Things that can happen naturally do not always happen. Do you know how much farm produce is wasted when they can't be sold and how much food in the supermarkets have been discarded for the same reasons? There is sufficient food and clean water on earth to satisfy all. But we often make the possibles impossible. Are we ready to make the impossible possible?

We all heard of self-cleaning window, do you want one? Thanks to nanotechnology, we do have an option to buy and install self-cleaning window. It'll save our time to clean windows. However, a person who earns a living by cleaning windows might feel sad about this invention. Windows can be made with self-cleaning property, and it's not a big deal for us to decide whether to purchase one or not. But events involving commitment are different, like faith, marriage and friendship? One always needs to watch the balance between dependence and independence when one steps into this area. Jesus refused to

exercise his power or turn stone into bread if his action would divert people from going deeper into the meaning of why he did that. For most people, miracle is an easy way out and could become addictive. Once one gets it, one may request for more.

We are familiar with religious terms like “faith”, “prayer”, “covenant”, “devotion” etc. And in the secular world, we use alternative terms like “confidence”, “loyalty”, “agreement”, “compliance”. The subtleness of the relationship involved is basically the same.

Faith is a life-long process, training and deepening our senses to have our trust in God. Prayer is the moment we expose ourselves to God, to know the difference between what we want and what God wants. Covenant and loyalty come in pairs, which signify the tensions between God and God’s creation. They are handles which we could hold on to something that we can’t see. To create possibles out of impossibles; that’s the miracle of faith, the way of making bread without a dough, and fishing without a net. No wonder Jesus withdrew from the crowd, who misunderstood him and tried to make him their king by force. Are we prepared to do something otherwise?

Let us remember what we said in today’s prayer of Reconnecting: When we are tempted to use our gifts selfishly, grant us servant-hearts, that we may share our gifts generously in the service of others. Inspire us this day, Holy One, that we may be part of your miraculous love. Amen.