

Order of Service for Zion, November 26, 2017 – FoodGrains Sunday
Hymns: 10,000 Reasons; Let Your Heart Be Broken; 722 – Lord, Whose Love
Scripture: Mark 6:30-44 (NIV); 2 Corinthians 9:10-15 (CEV)
Sermon Title: The Miracle Continues – Rev. Douglas Rollwage

The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.

But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things. By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat."

But he answered, "You give them something to eat."

They said to him, "That would take eight months of a man's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?"

"How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see."

When they found out, they said, "Five--and two fish."

Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was 5000. (Mark 6:30-44 NIV)

There I was last week, right there, in a place called Tabgha, where Christians have been gathering to remember this wonderful miracle of the Feeding of the 5000 for at least 1670 years or so. We know they have been, because they built a church right on the spot all those years ago. That first church was replaced by a bigger one, about a hundred years later; tragically, in the early 600s, a Persian invasion resulted in its destruction, and over the centuries the whole area, under Moslem control, was quietly forgotten, and covered with the silt and stones of time.

It wasn't until the 1930s that a dedicated group of archeologist monks began digging in the area, and uncovered the foundations of the ancient church. Excavating to floor level, they discovered wonderful mosaics, including perhaps the most famous in

all Israel – the Loaves and Fish, which marked the spot where the ancient Communion table originally stood.

In 1980, a new basilica was constructed, along much of the same foundation and lines of the second original. It is truly beautiful in its authentic simplicity, the sparse interior lit by alabaster windows, the mosaic floor restored, and that ancient Loaves and Fish mosaic calling our minds back to that feeding of long ago.

Many tour guides and groups can be overheard arguing over whether or not this was the exact spot the miracle happened, or if it happened at all. Arguing over the exact spot somewhat misses the point; the faithful gather there not to argue over geographical details, but to retell and remember the story, and in doing so, to celebrate the goodness of God. And as to whether it happened at all – well, I believe it did. Because a miracle of multiplication happened here too. And it is still happening today! It's a miracle the story which I tell whenever I'm in Tabgha. A miracle which has resulted in very nearly one and a half million meals.

One and a half million meals. That's the impact of what you have provided through our participation in the Canadian FoodGrains Bank over the last ten years: One and a half million meals. If that number is too big to get your head around, think of it in terms of saving the lives of 500 people, with meals every day for the last ten years. Put it another way - one person for every person here, on a very crowded Sunday, has been provided with food. Every day, when they would have had nothing. Or if that's even too big of a number, think of 120 families. Think of how 120 families have watched their children survive and thrive, where before they would have weakened and died. But now they have a future. Now they have a chance. Because of you. Because you cared. And, for the last ten years, kept caring.

For those relatively new to Zion, I can tell you that the seed for our participation was planted at a Missions Conference held here in the spring of 2007. One of the guest speakers was Don Raymer, representing the Canadian FoodGrains Bank. I and others were impressed with his vision, and we invited him to speak at a Sunday service a few months later. A few months after that, I was in Israel, at the very place the miracle of the Feeding of the 5000 is remembered, and somewhere deep inside me the connection between that miracle and the work of the Canadian FoodGrains Bank was made. And so upon my return, I told you the story of the 5000 hungry people who had followed Jesus into the hilly Galilean countryside late one November day. Here's how the Bible puts it (Mark 6:35-36 NIV):

By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. Send the people away so they can go to the

surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” Or, in the Rollwage translation: *“Look, Jesus, we’re in the middle of nowhere, here, it’s late, and if you remember, we came here to eat, and these thousands of people haven’t eaten either, so maybe you can get rid of them so they can take care of themselves while we do the same.”*

And then Jesus does the kind of wonderful thing that drove his disciples, and especially Peter, crazy. He gives Peter that smile and that look, and says, *“You feed them.”* And I’d love to see the look on Peter’s face as this soaks in. *“Us? Feed all them? Do you have any idea how much that would cost? Even if we had it? A crowd like this, four, five bucks a head, probably cost twenty thousand or more. Even if we had it. And that’s not including tax and a tip.”* (I made up the tax and a tip line, but the other stuff is there.)

And Jesus looks around, takes in the size of the crowd, looks back up at Peter, same look, same smile as before, and says, *“You’re right. Take a look around, see how much food we can actually scrounge up here first.”*

And Peter rolls his eyes and looks around at the others, to see if maybe they have a better idea, and there’s his brother Andrew, who’s talking to a little kid, and the kid has a basket in his hand. The kid is holding it up to Andrew, who looks inside and digs around a bit (John 6). He holds it up to Peter. *“Five loaves of bread, two fish.”* And Peter, who knows this is just about enough for one family’s lunch, and not quite enough to go around for, say, five thousand unexpected others, turns back to Jesus. *“Five loaves – five small loaves – and two fish.”*

“Perfect,” says Jesus. *“Tell everybody to sit down in groups, to make it easier to serve everyone at once.”* And he calls the boy over, and the boy gives him the bag, and Jesus gives him a hug, and ruffles the boy’s hair. *“You sit next to me,”* says Jesus. And meanwhile, the disciples, without the faintest idea of what Jesus has in mind, have organized the crowd into clumps of 50 or so, and now everyone is sitting, looking up the hillside to the high ground at which Jesus and the boy and the boy’s lunch are gathered.

And Jesus takes the bread, and in the prayer known by all there, says the blessing to God: *“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.”* And he breaks the bread, and gives it to the disciples, and says, *“pass it on,”* and they do, and they do, and they do, and they do, bread after bread, chunk after chunk, and it keeps coming, and it keeps coming, and their eyes are growing wide as more and more and more comes their way and through their hands and to the rejoicing crowd, and now it’s fish, fish, more fish, and Jesus is singing the song blessing God for the fish, and the boy is singing along, and soon there’s a chorus of song rising from the

mountain, as the bread and the fish keep coming, keep coming, until even the disciples, until even Peter could eat no more, every nook and cranny stuffed with bread, filled with fish, and waste not want not, twelve baskets of leftovers, brimming over, full.

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.” And fish from the basket. It’s not a bad miracle, as miracles go. Not a bad miracle at all.

I wouldn’t try to feed the lot of you here this morning, only a tenth of the number Jesus managed, on only five loaves and two fish. We gave it a good try last night with Chowder, Chili and Cows ice cream, but while wonderfully delicious, it could hardly be called miraculous.

But there is a miracle in the offing today, much more exciting than just trying to feed everyone here on five loaves and two fish, remarkable though that may be.

And here’s the miracle: Jesus took the gift of a family meal, and fed a multitude. There’s the key – a family meal. Now, what does a family meal cost these days? I’ll use the same example I used in the past: Swiss Chalet. If you bring your family to Swiss Chalet for lunch - say, four of you - and if you stick to Festive Special, to get the chocolate and the coupon; your family can eat, tax and tip, for about \$80. Minimum. Maybe it costs you more when you go, maybe less. Let’s stick with \$80.

Now let’s say, that instead of going to Swiss Chalet, we follow the example of the boy with the loaves and fish in the story, and give that \$80 to Jesus, for him to use. Why give Jesus the \$80? Well, we’re faced with the prospect of feeding plenty of hungry people too – plenty of hungry people – people much hungrier than that crowd in Tabgha. We’re challenged to feed crowd after crowd after crowd of people, many half a world away. Faced with that, what can my \$80 do? In my hands, very little. But in the hands of Jesus, \$80, the modern equivalent of five loaves and two fish – a family meal - is plenty to work a miracle.

Because we can put that \$80 to work on behalf of the Canadian FoodGrains Bank, and that \$80, together with the generosity of the landowners, sponsors and farmers, can provide seed and fuel and fertilizer sufficient for an acre of soybean, right here in PEI. Farmers like our friend Abe Buttimer can plough the field, plant that seed, do whatever farmers do to fields while things are growing (I’m speaking technically here), harvest, sell the crop, and then the money realized from the sale of it all, including all the profit, is sent off to the FoodGrains Bank. An acre of soybean can realize about \$500. Miracle number one: your \$80 lunch is already worth \$500.

That \$500 is then matched 4-1 by the Canadian Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Agency. Why does our government match those funds? Because they are convinced that the Canadian FoodGrains Bank is the most honest and efficient way to get this job done. Even our government realizes a bang for its buck, when it sees it! That money – now \$2500 – miracle number two: your \$80 has become \$2500 - is then used to buy food for the people around the world who haven't much of idea of whether or not there's going to be food tomorrow for themselves, let alone their family. In fact, once our version of five loaves and two fish goes through this miraculous process of multiplication – donations of landowners, sponsors, farmers, you; planting, harvest, sale, 4-1 matching, distribution - it will result in enough emergency famine relief food – about 3 metric tonnes, purchased, processed and delivered - to feed a family of four not just for one lunch, not just for one day, not just for one week, not just for one month, but – hold onto your hats – for as much as one whole year. One lunch. \$80. Feeds a family. Of four. For one year. And that's minimum. If the crops are better, there's more food yet. And that's a miracle, is I ever saw one. Let's see you do that at Swiss Chalet.

This is our chance to be a part of a miracle. Almost 2000 years ago, a little boy gave up his family's lunch. Jesus took that gift, and fed a multitude. Today, Jesus can take our lunch, our gift, and do the same. For a year. For a year.

There's still time to be a part of this miracle. We still need your participation. Last night, at the FoodGrains Feast, we launched our Christmas Card program for 2017, cards which you can send to people, telling them that for Christmas this year, rather than a tie or a scarf or a doodad, you made a donation in their honour to the FoodGrains bank, and they help feed a hungry family. For a year.

You were so kind this past month to make donations in my mother's name, to honour her memory. I can't tell you what those indications of love and support meant to me and to my family. I can tell you what they meant to her, during her lifetime.

Some years ago, we gave my mother a gift – one of those knick-knacky things you get for an elderly lady who doesn't really need anything. She opened it and said, "Oh dear God, what am I going to do with this?" She looked around her apartment, removed from her shelf what we had given her the year previous, and replaced it with the new one. Holding up last year's gift, perhaps (but not necessarily!) forgetting that it was us who gave it to her, she said, "Now I can finally throw this thing away."

Having learned from this, the following year we gave her a FoodGrains card. "May God Bless You, As You Are A Blessing To Others," it said on the front. She opened it, and read the inside of the card: "A donation has been made in your name that will feed a hungry family for a year." This gift, she put beside her bed. "When I wake up in the morning and feel worthless, I'll remember that a family has something to eat

this year because of me,” she said. From that point on, FoodGrains Cards were the only gifts she wanted from us.

I could tell that same story from the perspective of so many others, from stories you’ve told me in giving or receiving cards, all the way to the ladies at the Charlotte and Stamper Residences, each of whom receive a card in their name, giving them the thrill of participating in a miracle.

Of course, not everyone on your Christmas list will receive a FoodGrains card this year. Although I hope many do, it obviously isn’t the right gift for everyone. However, as you do your shopping, I would ask you to remember this: The gifts the wisemen gave – gold, frankincense and myrrh, gifts fit for a king, a healer, a god - told us who Jesus was. The best gifts we give should tell us, and others, who Jesus is. What Jesus valued. Gifts of hope. Gifts of care. Gifts of compassion. Gifts of love. After all, whose birth is it we are celebrating in the first place?

This Christmas, we are going to keep feeding the hungry. With your help. With your hands. And together, we will bring food to the men, women and children of our world, and the praises of God to their lips. We will put our faith to the test, and show the world that there is healing, and hope, and help, and life; that Jesus Christ is still in the business of reaching out to and helping the needy of our world. The miracle continues.

I’ll conclude by letting the Apostle Paul add his inspiring words of challenge and commendation to you. For through the work of the Holy Spirit, another miracle this morning: Through the work of the Holy Spirit, here are God’s words to you:

God gives seed to farmers and provides everyone with food. He will increase what you have, so that you can give even more to those in need. You will be blessed in every way, and you will be able to keep on being generous. Then many people will thank God when we deliver your gift.

What you are doing is much more than a service that supplies God's people with what they need. It is something that will make many others thank God. The way in which you have proved yourselves by this service will bring honour and praise to God. You believed the message about Christ, and you obeyed it by sharing generously with God's people and with everyone else... Thank God for his gift that is too wonderful for words!
2 Corinthians 9:10-15

This Christmas, every one of us can share in a miracle. Every one of us can make a difference – a life saving, life changing difference - in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Thank God for his gift that is too wonderful for words! Amen.