



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE REV. CANON WALTER B. A. BROWNRIDGE, THEOLOGIAN-IN-RESIDENCE THE NINTH SUNDAY  
AFTER PENTECOST, JULY 25, 2021  
2 SAMUEL 11:1-15; PSALM 14; EPHESIANS 3:14-21; JOHN 6:1-21

## LETTING GO, AND LETTING GOD

**John 6:1-21** [*Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.]*

Now glory to God, to the one by whose power working within us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. I intend to preach this sermon with our love; God can make a way out of no way. And may I speak in the name of our ever living, ever loving and ever leading God, amen. Please be seated.

First, I must thank your dean and the clergy and the wardens and just a host of folks who have made my stay this weekend here in Seattle not only lovely, but also spiritually enriching. And it is so good; this is my first Sunday, since March of 2020 to be in a pulpit and preaching to more than just the camera and to a crowd of folks of real human beings. So thank you for

this opportunity. Thus, now on to our homiletical challenge.

I began with the lyrics to a lesser-known song by one of the most famous musicians in our time song from 1970 and the artists; his real name is Stevland Hardaway Morris from Saginaw, Michigan. You may know him as Stevie Wonder of Motown Thing.

Again, and as a child known as little Stevie Wonder, and this song was in fact written as he was moving from the cast being little Stevie Wonder to a grown man writing about grown men and women things.

"Heaven help a child who never had a home.  
Heaven help the girl who walks the streets alone.

Heaven help the roses when the bombs begin to fall.

Heaven help us all.

Heaven help the black man who struggles every day.

Heaven help the white man who turns his back  
away.

Heaven help the one who kicks the one who's down.

Heaven help us all.

Heaven help the boy who won't reach 21.

Heaven help the one who gave that boy a gun.

Heaven help the people with their backs against the  
wall.

Heaven help us all."

Stevie ends this song with a prayer with the plea.

"Now I lay myself down before I go to sleep.

In a troubled world, I prayed my soul to keep.

The Lord keep hatred from the mighty,  
and the mighty from the small.

Heaven help us all. Heaven help us all,

Oh, lord help us all. Heaven help us, lord hear our  
call."

That song written in 1971 tells the truth that was just real. When he wrote that one year after, he appeared in a Harlem concert, part of that series called "The Summer of Soul."

Stevie wrote that on what they would call on the B-side of a record, it was on an album that is famous called 'Signed, Sealed, and Delivered'. That's a song most folks might know.

But this little prayer, this plea, you couldn't dance to it. It was a bit too religious. There was, in fact, a gospel choir backing him up. But Stevie was transforming into what he would become known for - a genius of not only putting words and music together but words and music that would move hearts to look themselves in the mirror through social and cultural commentary. Maybe even, God forbid, political.

But to me, the song represents the theme of today's gospel. It is about God's help. The text for today is about help in the form of miracles - the feeding of the 5,000. However, the point about miracles is that

it is only one form of God's action - God's help in the world.

Our story in John is from chapter six, and it is about, in fact, Stevie. Excuse me about Jesus, and the disciples had already completed about one-third of the way through the text, and they've already struggled. There's the prologue in John, and then it's Jesus' baptism, and then Jesus calls the 12 disciples, and then Jesus gets in the conflict, throwing moneychangers out of the temple, and then Jesus begins... John's gospel is divided between these mysterious discourses, and he has one with the Samaritan woman at the well. And then today is the first of Jesus performing what are called signs and wonders. The signs and wonders that point to Jesus being God, the Christ. For the writer of this Gospel, Jesus is God because he can do miracles.

So what do we make of this scene from, Jesus says to Phillip, what are they going to get to eat? Where are we going to get the money and fill it up? Maybe already he's had a little bit too much, and I think he may be speaking for the other disciples. Really, Jesus? We don't have enough.

So far, this disciple gig has seemed to be harder work than we thought. And now you want us to tap into our meeker savings? And Andrew speaks up and says, "There's a lad here with five loaves of bread and a couple of fish." And Jesus says, "Hey, let's have him sit down." And the miracle happens. And then here's what happens for those of us in the century sense in interpreting what happened, I learned it in high school from the Jesuits and then later in seminary, it's this idea of what...? Hold on a second. Don't jump so quickly to the conclusion it was a quote-unquote miracle.

Maybe what Jesus did was put the pressure on people and folks who had... Like the boy who had some bread and fish and was willing to share. Other people were shamed, cajoled, suddenly so moved to be altruistic and generous, and they gave of their plenty to those who had none. The first-century version of socialism, right?

I'm not saying that isn't a logical and possible explanation as to what happened, but if you take nothing else away from this homily, this sermon today, take away three things, really.

First, hold your hyper rationalism lightly. Don't grasp on it too tightly.

Sometimes, we need to avoid the trap of skeptics and super rationalists who say, "Nothing unusual here." Whether it's in religion or life when we reduce the world to such an utterly flat existence that there's nothing that can surprise us, that can enchant us, and it can make us rather smug. It can also reduce Jesus to a shame-based version of a prescient, omniscient social worker who can guilt you and shame you into action to do good. To do good because God is the great manipulator." No, Jesus is not a manipulator. Jesus is an exemplar who was willing to love and give of Himself for the life of the world, His own life.

Second, at the same time, hold your easy reliance on miracles lightly. Again, don't grasp on it too tightly.

So if you're one that doesn't like those sorts of reasonable naturalistic explanations that you can describe a miracle, and it's not only, of course, the bread and the fish, but then the walking on water. Some folks say, "Don't try to make Jesus into too much of a human." I want you to also hold just as lightly your magical dependence on this miraculous Jesus as your ultimate proof of Jesus as God. I hope you get what I'm saying. For those who are into magical thinking, the significance of Jesus cannot be based on extraordinary signs and wonders. It's like in that 1970s rock musical, 'Jesus Christ Superstar, and the song in the scene of "Jesus before Herod.' Herod had heard the stories of bread and fish multiplying, of walking on water, of changing water to wine, and healing. So he would say, "Come on, Jesus.

"So you are the Christ, the great Jesus Christ.

Walk across my swimming pool, turn my water into wine." and so on.

Jesus refuses because He's not a show pony for the powerful. The power of God is more comprehensive and expansive and maybe even more subtle.

That brings me to my third point, I probably exist somewhere spiritually, intellectually between these two polar opposite views, but I do, in fact, believe that miracles do occur, but they are in the realm of mystery, and I don't need to explain everything. The key point about miracles is that they are really about the power of God's act. I believe it is the power of God that exists when our love for God's people flows into God's love and the divine imperative to put that love into action.

So, it is because of our love and God's love that God can make a way out of no way. So hold gently both of those extremes of hyper rationalism that can obscure the truly miraculous. For what is truly wonderful in the story is not a human who could multiply loaves and fishes in such an astounding manner, but this truly human could represent by His words and deeds such a sign of pointing to hope and healing. The disciples would follow Him because they could feel that their hunger for the bread of life was going to be met.

Just remember again, because of our love for God and all humanity, God can make a way out of no way. I think that's happened this past 16 months. How many times we've cried out. "How long, oh Lord, how long? Is there going to be a way out of this?"

Yes, human innovation, compassion, and courage have been on display. Medical workers are one example. We've achieved great things with vaccines and science, and yet our society is still so fractured and divided. Our racial divisions are one example, and the pandemic has revealed another aspect of the American tragedy of White Supremacy and the racial reckoning that has occurred.

Now that's where love comes in again. And in now context of a pandemic, racism, and other struggles, I learned a new word that actually helps describe everything that may be going on. That is the word

syndemic and not S-I-N, but S-Y-N-D-E-M-I-C, syndemic. Which is about a set of problems that interact synergistically, creating even greater challenges. Challenges to our nation, our world, to ourselves. And so, yes, in addition to the racial reckoning, the novel Coronavirus, and the global climate crisis, we are beset suffering, and it may seem hopeless.

The problem of racism has been America's oldest sin. This summer's discovery of the unmarked graves of our indigenous brothers and sisters at Residential Boarding Schools. These residential schools existed in the USA and Canada and were managed by Christians. This included our sister church, the Anglican Church of Canada, the Roman Catholic church, and in our own Episcopal Church, A syndemic indeed.

Well, in the face of this issue of race and inequality, we can thank Paul, and his mandate, in the Epistle to the Church in Corinth that the call of all Christians is to be ambassadors for Christ for reconciliation. This points again to this power of love to be express in public as justice. It is a justice that will require God's aid to perform the truly miraculous.

In today's Epistle, Paul says, "I commend you that glory to God who is able to accomplish within us infinitely more abundantly, far more than we can ask or imagine." Paul understood this. And Paul, no doubt, had his own problems and issues, but he knew that if he allowed himself to participate with God.

Paul's words acknowledged that none of us personally or even collectively could achieve everything on our own. We are better together, and we are better with God.

Saint Augustine wrote, "Without God we cannot, but without us, God will not." archbishop Desmond Tutu, now in his 90th year who stood in this pulpit at one time, used to quote Augustine so much. That the work was not just about political action to transform society, but about love binding with God, to

transform and to save. And over 30 years ago, that love combined to create what people called in the nineties the South Africa miracle. And political scientists who I love and respect and other historians have now begun to look at it and rationalize, "No, it wasn't a miracle. It was political imagination, the force of will and maybe good luck."

But now, the revisionist has been challenged by the third generation of revision. "No, it was a bit more complicated than that. South Africa's transformation to democracy was both a spiritual and political story." Desmond Tutu's ministry and life reflect, I think, a miracle. Nelson Mandela, who served 27 years in prison, including 19 on an island in a cell not much larger than this pulpit becoming the father of a new nation. Indeed a miracle. The victory over apartheid o many countless others, not only in South Africa but in other parts of the world, have done such miracles because they have joined forces with God's divine will and imperative.

I began with the song from lyrics of a genius, so now I end with the words of what some have called her, the poet laureate of our Episcopal Church, Mary Oliver. And she wrote in this poem, 'Lagos'.

'Why worry about the loaves and the fishes?  
If you say the right words, the wine will expand.  
If you say them with love and  
The felt veracity of that love and  
the felt necessity of that love,  
the fish explode into many.  
Imagine him speaking, and don't worry about what  
is reality  
Or what is playing or what is mysterious.  
If you were there, it was all those things.  
If you can imagine it, it is all those things.  
So eat, drink, be happy,  
accept the miracle,  
accept to each spoken word, spoken with love.  
Amen.'