

The Miracle of Hidden Sandwiches

Rev. Dr. Michel Piazza

Sunday, July 29, 2018

2 Kings 4:42-44/ John 6:1-14

I have changed my mind about God more than once during my life, and it is likely that you have done the same. I wonder, though, if we also need a change of heart. To be more specific, perhaps what the progressive church needs are open hearts willing to have a mystical experience of God that we cannot explain or control. Humans do not live by head alone.

Whether progressive or conservative, we all must acknowledge the temptation to become intransigent fundamentalists in our own ways sometimes. That is strange because we change our minds about things all the time.

Like tomatoes, for example. As an Italian, I happen to believe the tomato is a sacred fruit, but I find great irony in the heirloom tomato movement because, once upon a time, people thought tomatoes were poisonous. In 1959, Richard



Gordon wrote a story about a cook who was loyal to the British cause and tried to poison General George Washington with tomatoes. The story is not factual,



but what is true is that, until the 16th century, people believed tomatoes were poisonous. Christopher Columbus is responsible for taking the tomato from America to Italy and the rest, as they say, is history.

All of us have changed our minds about hundreds of things as we matured and expanded the range of our experience. **So, what are some things you have changed your mind about?**

One of the things I have changed my mind about is the miracle stories in the Bible, like the one in today's Gospel lesson. When I was a child, I understood the stories literally and believed that Jesus was able to do these miracles because, of course, he was the son of God. That made perfect sense to me ... until I began to grapple with what it really meant to call Jesus "human."

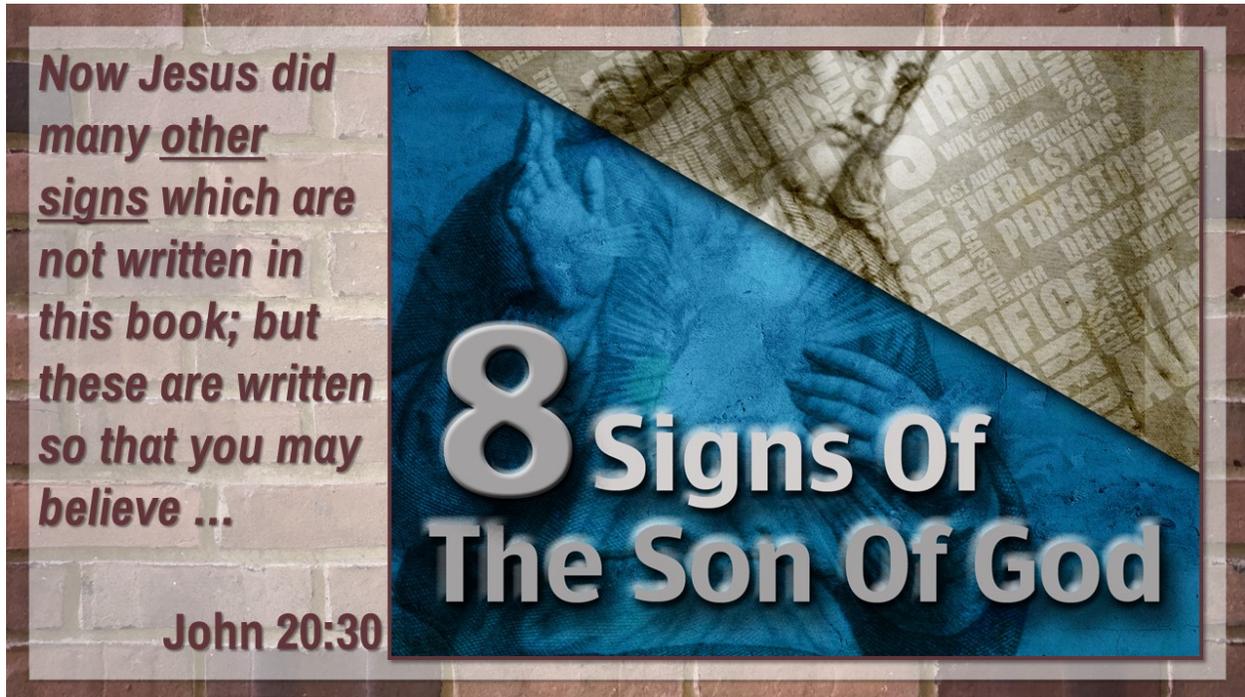


I remember asking my Sunday school teacher how Jesus could be human if he had magical powers that humans don't have. Lightning didn't strike me, though my Sunday school teacher looked like he wanted to, but I kept asking questions.

Like, what on earth was Jesus thinking when he said, "Greater things shall you do"? I can begin to wrap my head around that by remembering that the Church is the body of Christ on earth, and, despite all our mistakes and the evils we have done, the church also is responsible for creating most of the hospitals, orphanages, hospices, and schools in the world. So, in that sense, I suppose we have done more than the single person Jesus ever could have. We haven't resurrected Lazarus, but there are millions who returned to life after the care or ministry of the church.



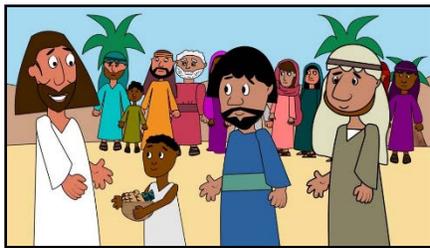
Eventually, I was able to begin to read these stories in their historic context. John ends his Gospel by making it plain that these stories were told as “signs” of the unique way that, in Jesus, the Word became flesh and dwelled among us.



Of course, Jesus lived in a pre-scientific age. Many of the things they might have thought were magical or miraculous signs we might find a scientific explanation for today.

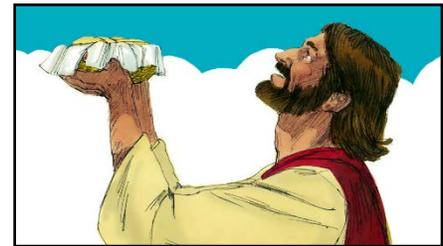
I read this week that children between the ages of 2-7 are the most likely among us to believe in magic. So, what do we, as adults who have tried to give up magical thinking, do with the miracles of Jesus? I decided years ago that the only way I could preach about the miracles of Jesus in a progressive church was to look for the truths they revealed and not slip into magical thinking. The miracles often are parables acted out to share truth deeper than magic.

In the story we read today, we can wrestle with what we believe about how Jesus magically multiplied the little boy's lunch, or we consider other lessons that may challenge who we are. For example, maybe the heart of this miracle is the simple beauty of a mother who got up early and fixed her son's lunch before he went off to hear a rabbi from Nazareth.

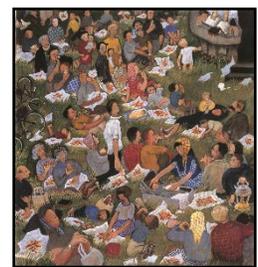


Perhaps the amazing thing was that, in the face of 5,000 hungry people, a little boy somehow learned the value of sharing, helping, and doing what he could for others in need. To me, though, the heart of the miracle is seen when Jesus took that little

boy's lunch and, in front of 5,000 hungry people, had the faith to give thanks to God for it. Oh, we can be grateful when we have all we need or all we want, but trusting God when we are short of hope or conviction or grace, THAT is true faith.



Ultimately, the miracle might be that, when the 5,000 people saw the little boy's generosity and the faith of Jesus, they suddenly were inspired to be more generous themselves. From under their robes, they began to pull out all the fish sandwiches they had brought but had hidden away lest they have to share. I know that isn't as exciting a version of the miracle as the one we believed when we were kids, the one in which Jesus magically reproduced the boy's lunch. Still, if you don't think motivating people to be authentically generous is a miracle, well, then, you clearly have never been the head of a pledge campaign.



Nothing is more miraculous than the Spirit giving us glad, grateful, and generous hearts that trust in God.

We all know that faith can support the body's healing power. I heard about a pastor who went to see a woman named Virginia Smith at the hospital. She was a member of another church, so he didn't know her. She was, however, the mother of a member, so he decided to stop by. After his visit, he called the member and told her how sorry he was that her mother was so close to death.

The poor woman panicked because her mother was in the hospital for a routine procedure and had been fine when she saw her earlier. She rushed back to the hospital to find her mother much like she had left her except her mind seemed confused. She didn't even remember the pastor's visit.

As the day went along, she grew weaker and weaker. Finally, the woman called to ask the pastor to come back to the hospital, which he did. Imagine everyone's surprise when they discovered he had visited the wrong Virginia Smith earlier. This Virginia Smith made a miraculous recovery upon learning she, in fact, did not have Alzheimer's.

That is the problem with rationalizing miracles: our faith is powerful at supporting the healing power God has built into all of us.

When I was just starting my ministry, and thought I understood much more about these things than I do now, I preached a sermon on having faith and what we could do if we did. A women's group in the next town heard about the sermon and asked if I would come teach a Bible study on faith. I was flattered, of course, but now, more than 40 years later, I would know I was being set up, not by the women of course, but by God.

The Bible study must have gone well because they immediately bundled me into their cars and took me to the hospital to pray for one of their members who was ill. We crowded into the little country hospital room and prayed up a storm.

I no sooner had said, "Amen" that they thought of someone else I should pray for. By then, I was feeling just a little like one of those faith healers. I'd made no claim to have healing powers, but I had dared to teach women my grandmother's age about the power of faith. Finally, after praying for three more women in that small town, they let me go.

I got back into my little baby blue Ford Pinto, and, before I cranked it up, I said a little prayer. I bowed my head and said, "Dear Lord, **don't ever do that to me again!**"

That could have been the end of the story, except, the next week, the woman who led that little prayer group called to tell me that. one after another, those women we prayed for had made a remarkable recovery.

What do you do with that? It wasn't anything I did, but even I'm not arrogant enough to say that it isn't something God did.

I certainly prayed for my husband, Bill, and he was the best person I've ever known. He still died of cancer, yet one of my dearest friends has had AIDS for 38 years and is still alive and healthy. How is that possible? I don't have a clue, but amazing things can happen when God's children cooperate with Life.

Once upon a time, when I was a child, I believed in miracles, but I changed my mind. I saw when miracles didn't happen too many times, and I became sophisticated, educated, and, well, cynical.

Today, I try to have a little more faith like a child. I don't pretend that what isn't true is. What I do, instead, is open my heart a bit, and release some of my arrogance and presumption.

I do know how much I don't know, and now I know enough to just shut up sometimes and trust that God doesn't need my permission to inspire a miracle now and then.