

August 3, 2008
Matthew 14: 13-21
In the presence of Miracles
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Flannery O'Connor, a great American novelist, a Roman Catholic Southerner with an unusual sense of religion and literature, once said, "Mystery is a terrible embarrassment to the modern mind."

I would substitute the word "miracles" and say that she is right about both; mystery and miracles.

We don't quite know what to do with miracles!

Take this mornings reading for example.

I am not really comfortable with the notion of an "interventionist God" who occasionally swoops in, and like a bolt of lighting makes bread and fish magically appear for one big crowd, one day long ago.

But the notion of miracle that perhaps Jesus, in offering all he had, and insisting that the disciples share all they had, created a different environment, and in so doing, invited others to share all they had: well, I rather think that is pretty darn miraculous too. If Jesus could convince 5,000 men to share the food they had with one another (not even counting women and children!) – well, that is a miracle to me! Because it is hard to get people to share when times are bad, and times were bad then!

Here is another thing to remember about miracles: they do not create faith, but over and over again in the gospels we hear Jesus affirming that someone has been healed because of their faith. Miracles affirm faith.

And in some translations the word miracle, taken from the Greek, is described as a "sign", a "wonder".

There were many miracles, many signs and wonders in the past two weeks that I spent in Israel. I would like to share a few of them with you, because it has been, just as the old line says, "a life changing trip".

- Really, I consider it a miracle that I was even offered a chance to go on this trip! This retreat/pilgrimage was offered by Wake Forest Divinity School, in North Carolina. I have never been there, never

ever been to the state even! Yet, through an amazing set of circumstances, my name given by someone else, made it onto a list of a professor I had never met, and he took a chance on me and, ta-dah; there I was on his list to go to the Holy Land!

- And I consider it a real wonder that for two full weeks I didn't do a single load of laundry, cook a single meal, make a bed, dust a room! It was a joy and a wonder for all of us pastors!
- And the sign of the presence of God; was there. For in the course of 2 weeks, 22 strangers became dear friends to me. Some of them knew each other a little bit, but some of us knew no one. And we all needed to accept that there would be theological differences and personal differences in that two week time. Yet in that time, we learned to be patient and to be caring of one another and to look out for one another, and come to love one another. It was a marvelous thing!
- Let me tell you one more story of wonder and glory from this trip. First, you need to know that the churches scattered all over Israel, like sprinkles on a birthday cake, are predominantly either Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox, including Syrian, Coptic, Greek, and Russian. And all of those churches have either gates, or walls, or ropes, or cords, marking off areas of prayer that you may not go into. We found this everywhere we went. Private masses for Catholics that excluded others, like us. This was one of the first things to begin bothering some of our group. As I tell this story you also need to know that there are three towns around Jerusalem that could possibly be the town of Emmaus! So the Crusaders built churches in all three of them and there are three Emmaus towns for Christians to visit if they wish. We went to the town of Abu Ghosh and the Crusader church there. It was a beautiful little church; cool white limestone, very simple inside, not crowded with tourists, no mass going on. Built in a sort of Norman or Romanesque style (I'm not sure of my architectural terms here!) it had lovely vaulted ceilings and beautiful acoustics. One of the women in our group stood in a corner, away from the roped off area around the altar, and tried a note of song. Then a young priest stepped up and invited her, and all of us, to come and sing right in the sweet spot, up by the roped off area. So we did. About 5 of us started singing *Of the Father's Love Begotten*, a song that belongs to the whole church, Catholic and Protestant alike. It was

so very beautiful! The rest of the bunch of us pilgrims joined in and we sang, beautifully. We also cried because it was such a purely beautiful and holy moment of prayer in song. All the barriers that our group had been experiencing around the churches of the holy sites, dropped away. We were there, in that beautiful little church, singing our love and joy and praying without any barriers. This was a holy moment, it was a miracle to me, a miracle of completeness and holiness and joy all together.

Miracles are like that I believe.

Signs and wonders happen, and you don't have to go to Israel to experience them, but you do have to open yourself up to them.

I heard that last week you were invited to remember someone who had exposed you to the spirit of God.

I believe you do not have to go far, or participate in any sort of esoteric worship to be aware of the miracles of God, the spirit of God, and the grace of God.

One of my favorite theologians, Karl Rahner S.J., wrote that we swim in the sea of God's grace as fish swim in the ocean. Surrounding and supporting our lives utterly, and yet, we are so often unaware.

I pray that you, and I, will open ourselves to this holy, wonderful and miraculous reality; that God is here, now, with us and you can find Him, if you but seek Him.

May it be so.

Amen.