

PROPER TWELVE, PENTECOST NINE, YEAR B, JULY 27, 2024

The Paris Olympics has just started so my question this morning is how many of you are old enough to remember the 1980 Olympics in Lake Placid and the game between the USA young team and the seasoned Russian Players? Does anyone remember what Al Michaels, the announcer screamed as the USA team cinched the gold medal? "Do you believe in Miracles?"

Al Michaels excited question brings to mind the issue of what exactly is a miracle? Is it being cured of a life threatening disease or is it finding a parking space or our team winning? What exactly do we think miracles are and are they that important to believe in?

In today's gospel we have two stories - the feeding of 5000 people and Jesus walking on water. The feeding of 5000 is in all four gospels and is usually described as a miracle. But in the Gospel of John, which we read today, it's described as a sign. That means John is telling us that it is pointing beyond the fact of the feeding to something very important about Jesus and, ultimately, about the nature of God. He's saying, don't get hung up on the feeding or how it happened rather look at what it points to. All of Jesus' healings, miracles and parables all point to something beyond the basic story. In other words is our faith based on believing in Jesus as a miracle worker or is our faith based on the way of life Jesus showed us that we are to follow?

Let me tell you a story. In February of 2007, The Rev. Sharon Hiers traveled with a few undergraduates and the dean of students from the University of the South, in Sewanee, Tennessee to Quito, Ecuador. The primary purpose of the trip was to record the stories of the first ever gathering of leaders from around the globe who were making a difference in their communities and in the world by what they were doing for their neighbors

They all stayed at a fine hotel, where they dined at a wonderful restaurant, and had access to workout rooms, and swimming pools. One of Sharon's traveling companions was Will, a self-identified atheist, who had a deep passion for all people particularly the forgotten. Will had spent the previous summer working in Quito, living and serving in one of the poorest communities of Carmen Bajo.

He was not content to sit in luxury at Hotel Quito, knowing that within miles was a community hungry for food, work, education, and someone to recognize them. So, one afternoon, when they had some free time, Will encouraged Sharon to go with him, to visit his friends in Carmen Bajo to see how different life was just a few miles away.

Since Will was the only one of the two that was fluent in Spanish, he arranged a cab, and they stopped at a local bakery on their way to grab something for lunch. With the change from a \$10 bill, they bought most of the loaves of bread the bakery had on hand, with plans to take them to the family of 10 they were going to visit.

On the ride over, the scenery changed quickly. As they drove out of Quito, the buildings became smaller as more and more streets turned to dirt-covered roads. When the cab driver finally reached the edge of Carmen Bajo, the road ran out, so he let them off at the end of a dirt path, and they walked the rest of the way in. On the way, Will pointed out the homes just across a valley that had slipped off the mountainside, remnants of all the family possessions cascading down the hill side. Just as they crested the top of a mound of dirt, the slope on the other side came in to view. For as

far as the eye could see, there was one cinder block dwelling after another, each with a person or two outside, looking around for something to do, somewhere to be. In Carmen Bajo, at that time, the unemployment rate was over 80%, mostly due to lack of education in the 500 or so families that live there.

That afternoon, like most, there were a number of people in the area watching the kids and shading themselves from the sun. As they stood at the crest of that hill with the equivalent of 5 loaves of bread and two fish - looking at all those hungry faces, Sharon thought what was needed was a miracle of biblical proportions.

There was no miracle of biblical proportions. The same number of loaves they showed up with were all the loaves they had to share. Not everyone they saw that day was fed with bread, nor was there anything left over. But something very unexpected did happen.

Will and Sharon visited with the family they came to see. They gave them the bread they had purchased and they were very grateful. They sat with that family for an hour or more and played with the kids and watched them color as they sat on their dirt floors, smiling with joy.

The majority of the time, they were asking about Will and what he was doing. If the conversation wasn't about Will, it was about God, and how they knew that God loved them and that God would provide as they pointed to that day's food, the bread they had brought.

But it was right at the end, when they stood up to leave, that the unexpected occurred. The mom in the house asked Will to pray for them. And so there they were, circled together, two Caucasian Americans from a wealthy school, a family of uneducated Ecuadorians - three generations strong, with six squirming children, and the atheist in the middle, praying to God. And pray to God he did. Sharon didn't understand all the words he said, but she had never heard, or maybe felt, a more beautiful prayer in all her life.

When Will finished his prayer, every person in the family said the only three English words they probably knew: God bless you. God bless you. God bless you. Over and over and over they said this to them.

The entire scene was totally unexpected. They had gone to visit them, to let them know they cared, to bring them a little something to eat, to make sure they knew they had not been forgotten. And what they received was the presence of Christ in a circle of people unexpectedly gathered together that day.

You see Jesus keeps showing up in unexpected places, in unexpected ways. What Jesus taught us as he walked this earth, was that he is with us, doing the unexpected, loving the unexpected, caring for the unexpected, all the time and pointing to us to do the unexpected too.

How does Jesus show up unexpected for us? How does Jesus show up in our three churches? How can we be the five loaves and two fish in our communities. How can we be the unexpected presence of Jesus for our neighbors?

This is what our three churches need to remember. Each of us is an outpost in our communities doing the work of Jesus, sometimes unexpectedly, by reflecting God's love to those around us. First and foremost, we do this through our facilities being used for food pantries, day cares, AA meetings, Girl Scout meetings and many other activities that provide for our neighbors. We do this by offering, Sunday services, special

services of healing, blessing of animals and blue Christmas services to our communities. But what other ways can we bring the 5 loaves and two fish to the needs of our communities?

We have a purpose to make sure that Jesus' way of life is known in the way we live our lives personally and corporately. How we treat our neighbors, sometimes in unexpected ways, is primary to our calling as an outpost of God's love. Let us ask ourselves, what else can we do together to bring Christ's presence into our communities? Instead of focusing on what we don't have, let us focus on what we do have and what we can do together. Remember, limitations aren't failures they are just a new way of looking at new possibilities. A recent article in Episcopal News Service says that congregational collaboration is becoming the norm. Even dioceses are merging and combining resources so they can better equip the smaller churches and lay leadership in new and exciting ways. This is the new normal. How can we live into that new reality? How do we become the 5 loaves and two fish for our communities?

To be a part of God's kingdom, an outpost of God's love, then we must be willing to serve, to give, to sacrifice, and to pour out our whole being in love for our neighbors and in the end that is all we can ever ask for. Amen