

I was at Cub Scout camp with my son Benjamin a few weeks ago. It is a three day long camp where a parent stays with his or her son and does the activities together. One of the dads who was in our group was a real jerk. He seemed more interested in showing off for his son than actually being with and helping his son. This was most obvious at the archery range.

At the archery range everyone starts with the targets very close to them. If you can hit the inner circles you move your target incrementally farther away. You keep moving until you either can't hit the inner circles or you are at the far end of the range. Admittedly this dad was reasonably good at archery. He was certainly better than all the boys and above average when compared to the other parents, but he was not the best. And while the other parents were regularly pausing between shots to guide their sons and help them improve, this guy kept calling attention to himself. He'd say things to his son like, "Check out that shot," and, "You see, your old man can shoot." His son was generally left to struggle on his own.

I think this sets us up to understand what is going on in our gospel reading for today. When I first read this I always feel like we've covered too many miracles. There's the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus walking on water. How about one miracle per week to write a sermon about? But when I look at this text more closely I realize these two miracles go hand in hand.

The feeding of the 5000 is the most widely attested miracle of Jesus, other than the resurrection. All four gospels include it and it is the only miracle in all four gospels. In it Jesus takes the meager resources of a boy's lunch and turns it into enough to feed a multitude. In fact there is more than enough. There are twelve basket-fulls left over.

Every biblical account of this miracle makes it clear that this is not a miracle of sharing. People did not decide to bring out their private stashes of lunch and share once they saw others sharing too. No, it is a real miracle where hungry people are fed. Commentator Gail O'Day notes, "The miraculous feeding dramatically demonstrates that Jesus has gifts and resources to meet the full range of human needs. He supplies

the daily bread that people need to sustain life.” (New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume 9, Pg. 597)

This is a great thing, but the crowds immediately get the wrong idea. They interpret Jesus’ actions into their own categories. Jesus’ gift of food, the offer of his grace, provided the crowd with insight into his identity, but they immediately try to twist it to conform to their pre-existent ideas. They can only understand the messiah in terms of their ideas of power and authority. They cannot understand the messiah in any other way. Maybe their idea of the messiah is not so much wrong as their ideas of power and authority are wrong. To make Jesus king is to judge him according to human glory rather than to see him in God’s glory.

When Jesus withdraws from the crowds after the miraculous feeding he is showing that he will offer his gift of grace without claiming worldly power. To use the image of the guy at the archery range at Cub Scout camp, the other parents who were better than him used their skills to help their sons grow. That was being somewhat like Jesus. This guy used his skills for his own glory, to show off, to draw attention to himself.

But, does that mean that when we are good at something we should hide it? Jesus withdrew from the crowds after the feeding of the 5000. Should we withdraw or dampen our gifts so that we don't accidentally draw attention to ourselves? No, not at all. And that takes us to the second miracle, Jesus walking on water to the disciples.

In some ways that miracle is the reverse of the feeding of the 5000. The disciples were having a rough go of it, yes. The wind was against them, but they were making progress. They weren't hungry and without food. They weren't in danger like the time when Jesus stills the storm. But they were in need. They could use some help. And Jesus comes along.

Now there's a mistake we may make when we read this passage. The gospel of Matthew and the gospel of Mark both contain a scene with Jesus walking on the water. They both say the disciples are afraid because they think they are seeing a ghost. Perhaps these two accounts and this one that we have today from the gospel of John are all rooted in the same historical event, and we are just hearing them from different

perspectives. That's probably true, and if that is the case then let's not miss what John wants to teach us from his perspective.

John hints that the disciples knew it was Jesus walking toward them. They are afraid, not because they think it's a ghost, but because they are seeing Jesus in even greater glory than they had ever seen before. Our Bible translations do a real butcher job on Jesus' words to the disciples. He does not say, "It is I; do not be afraid." He says, "I AM. Do not be afraid."

Now what happens to people in the Bible when they face God as the great I AM? They are afraid. They are very afraid. When confronted with the infinite power of God they shake in their shoes (And probably do other things that would require washing their clothes!) That's why the disciples are scared.

Jesus says, "I AM. Do not be afraid." In other words, God is here with you in full power and majesty, and you are safe. It is okay. God wants to be with you, not to frighten you, but to let you know how valuable you are.

In the first miracle Jesus uses his power to feed 5000 people and it reveals his glory. The crowds take it the wrong way and want to make him king. In this second miracle, walking on water, Jesus reveals his glory for the sake of grace. Immediately they get to the land toward which they were going. Again, commentator Gail O'Day notes, "Jesus reveals himself to his disciples in order to allay their fears, to ensure their safe passage, to remind them that God has been, is, and will be their rescue. Jesus' glory is not revealed for power, but for grace-filled pastoral care." (Ibid.)

And so, rejoice in the things you are good at. Maybe you can't walk on water, but you are all very gifted people. God made you so. Don't hide those gifts. Let them shine. But don't let them shine for your own benefit. After all, God is the root of your gifts. Let them shine for the benefit of others.

One final thing from these miracles. These are not just spiritual ethereal things Jesus does for these people. These are real things. Food was given to hungry people. The

disciples' boat reached the place to which they were going. God's grace doesn't just come to us as a spiritual feeling. God's grace comes to us in real and tangible ways.

When we say we are the Body of Christ, let's make sure we take that literally enough. When Jesus used his gifts and powers for the benefit of others, so too should we. Don't just say to a person, "I'll be praying for you" when you are capable of doing more. If you are capable of offering real tangible help, do so. It is God's gift to you that you are sharing.

It is not up to us to pray hard enough for God to miraculously change the rules of the world for us. It is up to us to use God's gifts to change the world. It is within our power because that is the power God has given. Maybe you can't do miracles. But you can live in grace, and you can change the world. Amen