“And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand people.”

Last night, Lisa and I had the honor of attending the birthday party for little Jonny Jorkan. Jonny is the nephew of Joe and Yo Yo Jorkan, two of our newest members of First Congregational. It was a wonderful celebration! I would honestly say that we all witnessed a bit of Loaves and Fishes wonderment!

Traditionally, the first birthday party of a child is a momentous occasion for the people of the Marshall Islands. A birthday event beyond compare. The closest equivalent would be that of a wedding reception. So, when Lisa and I arrived last evening we joined over 200 friends and family. The band was playing. The children were playing. And then the Island feast began. It was amazing!

Even more amazingly to me, the people kept coming! From Portland. Seattle. Spokane. Northern California. The crowd swelled; maybe not to 5000 but at least 350 men, women and children were packed in that hall to celebrate the birthday of little Jonathan. You thought you had some big birthday parties!

Honestly, I was afraid we, in the first wave of partiers, might have eaten too much leaving little to eat for those arriving later, but somehow more food kept appearing. That was the first miracle! (And the result of two days worth of cooking I was later told.) So, we all joined in the feast!

Then, the dancing began. One person dancing after another, each performer showered by gifts from Jonathan’s grandmother, the community’s matriarch, who would lay garments across their shoulders as they danced. Dozens of dancers offering their skills of rhythm and grace to the delighted crowd and now sleeping Jonathan, who had found a comfortable spot on Lisa’s shoulder. The traditional dancing lasted well into the evening. And by the way, you should see our Joe dance! He’s got some moves!

Before Lisa and I left, we too were blessed with about a dozen gifts, many of them handmade, each offered with a warm embrace.

What an enchanted evening! Lisa and I will never forget it. It was an honor to be part of the festivities!

On our return home, we both reflected on the impact the evening had on us. While enjoying the celebration and night of incredible generosity, and watching the embrace of little Jonathan by the hearts of 350 of his brothers and sisters; we were also witnessing, and part of, a joy-filled testimony to the miracle of life. What a gift!

That is what I would like to speak to you about this morning. The miracle that is life.

This morning’s lectionary reading in Mark is the story of the Loaves and the Fishes - the feeding of the 5000. One of the 37 miracles recorded in the Gospels.
I don’t know about you but I find I have a degree of resistance when it comes to the miracle stories. Perhaps, because I have a difficult time getting my head around such things. They are just not part of my normal world-view. They make me wonder. Maybe because they happen so frequently in the Bible and they seem so rare in life today.

So, when I read about Jesus…
Casting Demons into a herd of Pigs,
Or Calming storms by a mere command,
Or bringing sight to the blind with a little bit of mud,
Or Turning water into wine.
…I feel my mind stiffen a little.
Surely this must be some sort of an exaggeration!
Maybe the pigs ate something bad that day!
Maybe the storm was about to end anyway.
Maybe the guests were so drunk they didn’t realize they were drinking water. That could happen you know!
And now, we have Jesus feeding 5000 people with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish
What are we to make of that?

In her children’s book, Julie Andrews Edwards states, “Miracles, contrary to popular belief, do not just happen. A miracle is the achievement of the impossible, and it is only when we put aside our greed, anger, pride and prejudice so that our minds are open and ready to accept it, that a miracle can occur.”

That is surely one explanation for the feeding of the 5000. Commentators have noted that it was customary for people to travel with a sack of provisions so they could restore their strength along their journey. So, perhaps the true miracle that day was how Jesus coaxing the crowd into a spirit of generosity. The miraculous opening of hearts that compelled his followers to share what they already had.

This is no small miracle I must say. We are so ready to hold on to what we have, just in case or just because. I dare say sharing doesn’t always come naturally. Even for Godly folk.

I learned this lesson early on when I attended my first all-church retreat as a seminarian. Thirty-four years ago this month, about 80 men, women, and children came together to live in Christian unity while enjoying the beautiful sunshine on Cape Cod. Everyone was intent on bringing to life our theme of Being God’s Blessings to one Another and the World. As a young man about to enter the ministry, it was inspiring to watch members of the church embody that theme over the weekend, or at least until Saturday night! That was the night of the great Pizza Debacle!

So, perhaps the miracle that Jesus performed was manifestation of generosity into the hearts of people that day. Hearts laid open revealing and releasing the spirit of compassion and agape love. Such miracles do happen. I have seen them time and time again when people of faith put aside their differences, their egos, their more selfish tendencies to bring relief to the weary, joy to the downtrodden, and hope to the suffering.

As one of your pastors, I am here to say that such miracles happen every week within these walls and out there in our community in a variety of life changing ways. I thank God for those miracles!
Let me speak now to the young people who are about to embark on the Summer Fun Camp experience. Thank you! You are doing more than giving those little children a break from the enormous challenges that have become their life. You are offering more than a few good times and the chance to swim in some chilly water in the hills of Oregon. Because know this; when you look into their eyes and see their true value, when you help them find the courage to fight their fears, when you share your love with them even if they might be a little challenging at times, you are honoring the miracle that is their very life.

When you dance and sing and eat together see it as a way to celebrate their worth, their gifts, their birth. As you head out this afternoon to Camp Adams, I offer what I use to close a Sacrament of Baptism. Remember these words, “Miracle of miracles, that so great a God is reflected in so small a dwelling.”

Which brings me back to Jonny’s birthday. To come together as a community to pour out our gratitude for the miracle of one life, one life, meant so much to me! It offered a new perspective on life, and I remember something that was offered at our time of reflection during our Staff Meeting last week. It was a quote that is often attributed to Albert Einstein. You might know it,

“There are only two ways to live your life.
One is as though nothing is a miracle.
The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

To live as though everything is a miracle.
How would your perspective change if you were able to see your life through such a lens?
How might you see your family, your colleagues, your work, your very existence here on this earth? How might it change?
How might your heart be opened and what blessing might be revealed if you were able to see yourself as the creation of a Divine miracle?
How might we as a community of faith better reflect the true measure of our worth when we recognize that God is still in the miracle business?

It is possible, the evidence is all around us!

Let us pray…

Help us to look through the lens of your love and grace to truly see the miracles that exist all around us. Help us God to acknowledge that miracle we call life and help us to look with fresh eyes upon your children, all of your children, to help reveal the full measure of your glory.