

**“PROGRESSIVE MIRACLES”**  
**Isaiah 55:1-15; Matthew 14:13-21; Romans 9:1-5**  
**July 31, 2005**  
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I have never attended a progressive dinner, where each stop along the way offers a different course-maybe starting with one family’s healthy salad, and arriving at the last home to share a scrumptious dessert. I have recently come to believe that second Isaiah and Jesus believed that progressive dinners would lead to the creation of a progression of miracles for children, women and men, and creation itself in the sharing of a hunger for the wisdom and balance of justice and peace on earth. Miracles like Elisha nurtured, telling the man from Baal-Shalishah to feed 100 people with twenty loaves of bread in Kings 4:42; and miracles like God raining manna from the heavens onto the desert everyday for forty years to keep covenant and feed the Hebrew people.

Second Isaiah invites us to “Come, buy and eat with no money,” and Matthew retells the story of feeding five thousand men with two fish and five loaves of bread. A remarkable event. The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle of Jesus to appear in all four gospel accounts. Progressive thinking empowers us to move forward with hope that justice and peace will continue to impact our lives. Justice and Peace is the grist and the yeast of progressive miracles. In fact, Isaiah and Jesus were so progressive they invited everyone to dinner, inviting everyone to witness the miracle on their own terms and empowered others to do the same.

What seems so harmless-the miracle of hospitality-will evolve into a confrontation with political agendas and social injustice in the kingdom of Judah and the city of Jerusalem in second Isaiah’s time and six centuries later in the world that Jesus traveled. Isaiah’s and Jesus’s progressive dinners caused all kinds of problems for folks who did not think there was enough food to go around and did not like all the radically delicious choices being served up for the common people. Mix in a pinch of misinterpretation regarding the purpose of the coming Messiah and dinner plans change.

We have our own problems in the world today as we struggle to find a balance with pluralism and orthodoxy, cultural diversity and the Way, the Truth, and the Light. Progressive guest preachers don’t have to worry too much about the politics of sermon writing. We are not restricted by the polity of the local church. We preach one Sunday and are gone the next. Liz and Ryan are another matter: your pastors need to be sensitive and understanding of the political and theological diversity and pluralism of the congregation: (1) to be heard, and (2) to keep their job. To help illustrate the dynamics of the parish-pastoral relationship, I will share what can only be called “An Urban Legend.”

There was a progressive pastor who was frustrated with his congregation. (This is an old legend before women were allowed to be ministers and “progress” referred to Pilgrims). So one Sunday as the story goes, he stepped up to the pulpit with Bible in hand to preach and

began by reading from the book of Matthew, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.” He promptly looked up at the members of the congregation and said, “We don’t believe that!”, and he ripped the page from the Bible. I don’t know how many pages he ripped out of the Bible that Sunday, or how long his sermon lasted that fateful day; but, according to the legend, I do know that was his last sermon at that church.

Hopefully, good ministers learn to listen to, and share, the Good News of Jesus Christ with other people and a world that values justice and peace. And with the help of God’s good grace, set about their ministry without polarizing the congregations they serve. And with a similar gracefulness, I pray congregations will welcome creative thinking and the exploration of new ideas. There is plenty of room for corporate and personal growth in the realm of justice and peace in the local church and the world today.

I read the scripture readings for this Sunday, did some Bible study, listened to our lectionary group’s reflections and worried about standing up at the pulpit after not preaching for six months. I decided one way to think about these passages’ connection is, “How do you and I learn to encourage folks on their journey home with a feeling of being filled?”

Our General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, John Thomas, has named God’s action in the world as an “extravagant welcome” that invites extravagant generosity. I encourage you to consider the idea of being hungry and being filled as containing both spiritual and physical implications. Progressive miracles herald God’s extravagant hospitality with images of compassion, generosity and inclusiveness as we journey together as God’s people.

For all who embrace a vision of justice and peace, a series of progressive miracles just might get us from where we are today-on this blue jewel we call “earth”- to an understanding and realization of a world that honors the dignity and rights of all people-and yes, all religions. . .and yes, all beliefs. . .even when we don’t agree with other folks’ thinking, techniques or actions.

The Jerusalem Bible translates Isaiah 55:1, “Oh, come to the water all who are thirsty; though you have no money, come! Buy corn without money, and eat, and at no cost, wine and milk.” Interpreted metaphorically or literally, what of second Isaiah’s message is not understandable? Second Isaiah is offering us an example of extravagant hospitality that I believe is hungering to give birth to a progressive miracle

Last week Donald Rumsfeld changed the language and the sense of our president’s “Global war on terrorism.” Rumsfeld spoke this new language while praising a retiring Navy officer who had served as “. . .our country wages the global struggle against the enemies of freedom, the enemies of civilization.” What is the cost of using our administration’s exclusive definitions to describe the character and behaviors of the enemies of freedom and civilization, even as we seek to be in relationship and covenant with distant and foreign people and nations?

Claus Westerman writes about God's promised covenant in the passage from Isaiah 55:3-5, "What is promised to the nation once it is delivered from Babylon are not new victories, or the subjugation of foreign nations, but an increase in numbers because of the distant and foreign people who come to Israel and want to belong to her because of the God of Israel."

Certainly, the world has changed since Isaiah's disciple penned these prophetic words in hope and expectation of the re-establishment of the kingdom of Judah around the time of the fall of Babylon in 539 BCE.

Truth is, we are all hoping for a little Good News in our lives together. William Holladay, in his book, *Isaiah: Scroll of Prophetic Heritage*, believes second Isaiah saw all of Israel embodying God's covenant with David and notes second Isaiah called Cyrus of Persia, God's "anointed," as well, in Chapter 45:1. When I am able, I watch public television's "News Hour with Jim Lehrer" and get to learn all about what one of the news sponsors is doing to make a better world. Truth is, I want more than anything for ADM to feed the world. But deep down in my heart, I know feeding the world will take more than ADM has to offer in order to convince governments and leaders of nations to honestly commit themselves to providing food, housing, health, and human services. I know the feeling of being told by big and little business that we cannot afford to provide human services without having a strong economy and that, at this time, it is not financially feasible to provide the services.

I suspect, when the disciples told Jesus that they did not have enough food to feed the folks who had come to listen to Jesus talk about his vision of extravagant hospitality, Jesus decided it was time for the disciples to participate in a progressive miracle. Webster's New World College Dictionary defines a miracle as, ". . .an event or action that apparently contradicts known scientific laws and is, hence, thought to be due to supernatural causes, especially to an act of God." And a second definition for those who ponder the meaning of an "act of God". . .a remarkable event or thing; a marvel."

Shusaku Endo in his book, *A Life of Jesus*, writes, "Passover was pre-eminently the festival that nurtured the emotional ethnocentrism of the Jews. . . (The believe in one's own ethnic group), and the event in the story came on a day near Passover. The event came at the moment when the popularity of Jesus happened to coincide with the heightened intensity in the people's dream of the Messiah's coming, the advent of their Savior who would expel the conqueror and restore to them the Kingdom of Judah." This is the same thinking that lead the people to extravagantly welcome Jesus on Palm Sunday and a few days later fed their anger. Because Jesus did not come to Jerusalem to perform the people's dream, he returned to celebrate the Passover.

What makes Jesus' miracle on that day a progressive miracle? It is not the feeding of 500 men (with little mention of the women and the children); it is certainly not because he performed the magic that would transform two fish and five loaves of bread into enough food to feed the multitude of folks who gathered to listen to him that eventful day. It is not even the reality that Jesus is the son of God that makes this remarkable event a progressive miracle. What happened that day in that deserted place is. . .the disciples recognized Jesus for

who he really is and, following Jesus' instructions, did the most remarkable thing of all: the disciples fed all those people that day, and there were twelve baskets of food left over. All four gospel accounts tell this story; be it a remarkable event or a marvelous act of God, this is a story of a progressive miracle.

A progressive miracle is a miracle that cannot help but crawl under your skin and make you wonder what is happening. A progressive miracle calls to you to dream and imagine what, at first thought, seems to be impossible. A progressive miracle moves you forward with a vision of hope and light in a sometimes dark and confusing world. Progressive miracles are all about feeding people with God's love, sharing real food with folks who are hungry, and sending God's children home, filled one day at a time.

And for all of us "Jesus freaks," the Good News of Jesus Christ is an offering of extravagant hospitality to our friends and to our enemies; we offer food to sustain the body and the spirit, we serve up free health care and human services. Progressive miracles are the embodiment of justice and peace - scientifically unbelievable happenings. The disciples figured it out; so can we! Amen.