

Miracles

Sunday, December 27, 2020 || First Sunday After Christmas || Lay Speaker Galen Schad

We invite you to light a candle at 9:30 AM and join us in prayer ONLINE or over the PHONE

Audio worship, including music, prayers, and the sermon is available at

<https://georgewhitefieldumc.weebly.com/worship-services>

Audio worship is also available at (978) 990-5000, access code 719365#. Just dial in, enter the access code on your keypad, and you will hear the service begin with music.

Scripture Reading

Matthew 14:13-21

When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food." Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered. "Bring them here to me," he said. And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Sermon - Lay Speaker Galen Schad

A couple of years ago at Christmas, my little brother's teacher gave his class a writing prompt. They were supposed to write down what they wanted for Christmas while using descriptive language. While his class was writing 1-2 paragraphs, he only wrote down one sentence. He wrote that he only wanted 10 pounds of food for the hungry. His teacher looked at how short his paper was without closely observing what it said and she sent him back to his desk to add more sentences. He sat at his desk looking at his paper for a couple of minutes when she came over and read what he wrote. She was touched. When she told our parents through email she accidentally put down 100 pounds instead of 10. When my mother saw it she posted his Christmas wish onto Facebook where a member of the United Methodist Women saw it and decided to help. She shared with the entire UMW and they decided to bring the request to church. The UMW are known for getting things done and they were determined to make his Christmas wish come true. So in the end, he delivered 200 pounds of food to the food shelf. A simple wish turned into 200 pounds of food for the hungry in only two weeks. That is a miracle.

The scripture today is one of the best-known miracles from Jesus. This miracle is the only miracle that shows up in all four gospels and a minor retelling of this miracle shows up two other times as well. The story of Jesus feeding the five thousand starts with Jesus mourning the death of his cousin John the Baptist. John was a mentor figure for Jesus's career. Even before they were born, John was affected by Jesus, jumping for joy when Mary entered Elizabeth's house. John baptized Jesus in the River Jordan. Even though they hadn't been preaching for long, Jesus and John had been stirring up the political and religious groups by proclaiming the word of God through a message of repentance of sins. John the Baptist managed to upset the Queen, who with her daughter, demanded his head on a platter. When John was murdered, it shook Jesus and helped him realize that his preaching could have dangerous consequences.

Jesus went, away from the crowds of the cities by sea to mourn in a quiet area. However, a resourceful mob of people found where he was headed. When he landed, they asked him to heal them. Jesus had a decision to make. He could have compassion on them or he could have pushed them away to mourn alone. He decided to help the hurting even though he himself was hurting. After a long day of healing people, the disciples went to him and asked him about what to do about the people being fed. The disciples urged Jesus to send the people away to go and get food from the closest town. But instead, Jesus said to keep them there for the disciples shall provide the food for the five thousand men. The disciples were probably questioning Jesus, asking among themselves where they could get enough food? All they had was two small fish and 5 loaves of bread, which would be a stretch even for just the 12 disciples and Jesus. This would be impossible to feed five thousand men, not counting women and children. The disciples did as Jesus asked and gave the food to Jesus to bless and then one of the best-known miracles happened. Just think about how many people they fed. Most likely over 10-15 thousand people from 5 loaves of bread and 2 small fish. All that was needed was the blessing of Jesus, the Son of God, to make what was barely enough for 13 people ample food to feed all of them and 12 baskets to spare, all from 2 small fish and 5 loaves of bread. I mean, if that isn't a miracle, then what is?

It could have been that when the food was distributed, everyone took out a bit of food from the basket and put some of their own in. There were a lot of scraps leftover from whatever they had for lunch, what they had brought from home, or bought from stores. People became inspired by a sense of gratitude that they weren't focused on how little they had, but on the abundance of God. Another interpretation is that God put some bread and fish into the baskets while it was being passed around so all would be fed, similar to God providing the manna in the wilderness for the escaped Israelite slaves. No matter what the actual cause, the miracle happened when Jesus blessed the food. If Jesus didn't bless the food, there wouldn't have been enough to feed everyone, let alone have leftovers. Just think about how long it could feed all of them. Remember, originally they barely had enough food for the thirteen of them, let alone the five thousand men or the countless women and children present. Yet afterward, the disciples had gathered twelve baskets full of food for them to keep for later. Twelve baskets of food, one for each disciple to gather or one representing each of the tribes of Israel, showing that God would provide for all.

Just think about this scripture as if you were a person there to be healed. You had just come from the nearest city, following the crowd to see Jesus. You had heard about this teacher who was preaching and healing people. It's your lucky day because you managed to break your arm and can't work until it heals. You were hoping he would heal your broken arm. You follow the crowd around the lake and see Jesus getting out of the boat. Jesus takes compassion on the crowd and decides to heal and preach. It is really hot out waiting. After waiting in a long line of people to be healed, it becomes your turn. You go up to him and ask to be healed by the power of God and he blesses you. Your arm no longer hurts and you have the full range of motion once again. Then you shuffle out of the way as others go to him for healing. You stay to witness the healings and to hear Jesus' teachings. Later when it's dinnertime, you start to pull out the little amount of bread left from lunch, but you overhear the Disciples ask Jesus about sending the crowds away to go and get food. Instead, he tells them to bring all of the food that they had to him, for him to bless, and then for it to be passed around. As you grab a bit of the bread and fish from Jesus, you slip the remaining crust of bread from your lunch in the basket. In the end, you and the others are astonished because there are twelve baskets full of bread while you and everyone else has had their fill.

Nowadays, we could use that miracle in places that don't have enough food or places that don't have the privilege of having a food pantry near them. While researching food pantries, I talked to James Stephen about Ruth's Harvest which is in Leominster. When you donate \$1 to Ruth's Harvest, it manages to get \$4 worth of food for the hungry through the Worcester County Food Bank. I would call that a miracle especially since in the United States, 41 million Americans struggle with hunger. Only last year, 75,000 people, with 32% of them children, turned to places like Ruth's Harvest in the Worcester County Food Bank network. How lucky are we that we have a support network for those who need it the most, especially for the kids. With schools in a mix between hybrid and remote sessions and adults are out of work, we probably need this miracle even more.

An example of a feeding miracle is when one of my mother's friend's daughters received \$85 for her birthday. She decided to give it to her United Methodist Church's feeding ministry. Her parents were so touched by that act of kindness that they said they would match what she donated and asked for others to do the same. Thankfully the \$85 was tripled quickly. That is not to mention, the gift's buying power would be multiplied by 4 by the food bank. This multiplication of the food bank's buying power turned the birthday gift into \$1k total. This is proof that miracles are still happening. Amen.

In Our Prayers. Thanksgiving for: the gifts that make ministry possible, medical professionals and researchers. Holding in our hearts: those experiencing unemployment, those facing racial injustice and violence and cannot breathe under the weight of oppression, those grieving the loss of loved ones (Heidi and family in the loss of Millie), those experiencing illness or health issues - especially those who are ill with Covid-19 including George, and Sandy's son and family, and (for Al (and family as they care for him), Dan D. (Vicki's husband), Kelly R., Lindsey S., the Reim family and for Marge in hospice care), those in nursing homes or extended care facilities (Betty, Claire, Priscilla), those caring for others (Carrie G., Crystal, Rachel), the United Methodist Church. *Note that this list will renew each month.*

Benediction/Commission and Blessing

And now, may the peace of the Lord Christ go with you wherever God may send you; may God guide you through the wilderness, protect you through the storm; may God bring you home rejoicing at the wonders God has shown you; may God bring you home rejoicing once again into our doors.¹

¹ Book of Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals

Building an Inclusive Community**Sunday, January 3, 2021 || Second Sunday After Christmas || Rev. Megan Stowe***We invite you to light a candle at 9:30 AM and join us in prayer ONLINE or over the PHONE**Audio worship, including music, prayers, and the sermon is available at**<https://georgewhitefieldumc.weebly.com/worship-services>***Audio worship is also available at (978) 990-5000, access code 719365#. Just dial in, enter the access code on your keypad, and you will hear the service begin with music.*****Scripture Reading****John 1:1-18*

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Sermon - District Superintendent Rev. Megan Stowe

As a United Methodist Minister, I have done quite a bit of moving around. It is really hard moving into a new community, new neighborhood, new school system, and a new church. The ways in which people make connections and build relationships these days are vastly different than when we grew up, hanging out on front porches and where everyone knew their neighbors. What I've learned as I've moved is that it is important to have neighbors, people we can call on when there is an issue. People we could list as emergency contacts if our children get sick while at school.

In a previous appointment, our family did a parsonage walk through just before moving in and the next-door neighbors came over and introduced themselves to my family. They had children who were right about our kids' ages. They graciously invited us to their annual Fourth of July backyard bbq. Their radical hospitality to someone they didn't even know was so beautiful. Wonderful friendships sprung forth from these neighbors. The next-door neighbors made space for someone different, someone new, someone who was on the outside looking in. They modelled for me what a radically inclusive community might look like. Families with neurodivergent children were welcomed alongside neurotypical ones. Divorced and married and single people mingled together. Infants and senior citizens enjoying each other's presence. The Unitarians, Catholics, atheists and United Methodists gathered together to celebrate freedom and family. Rather than being stingy, food and drink were in abundance, each neighboring family contributing what they had. Since we just moved, our offering was not great or homemade, but it was accepted graciously. It was as if the Kingdom of God was here on earth. It was everything church is supposed to be about, and frequently isn't.

We are halfway between the New Year and Epiphany. In the New Year, we make resolutions. One that your congregation is making is to build a radically inclusive community, welcoming a diversity of ages, gender expressions, social classes, sexual orientations, and political beliefs. So let's explore through the Gospel text and the example of the neighborhood party how we can build an inclusive community together.

Our Gospel text this morning is frequently referred to as the Prologue to the Gospel of John. This is a very beautiful and complex text which sets out the themes that will be present throughout the entire gospel. A significant theme is that of the incarnation, of God dwelling amongst us through Jesus. We hear this in verse 14 where "the Word became flesh and lived among us." The Message Bible says it this way, "The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood." This isn't a God who is physically distanced from us but is actively engaged amongst us. A second theme is about our radical inclusion as God's children. I would like us to spend some time this morning on these two themes of inclusion present in the Gospel text and how they inform us as Christians today.

The incarnation, God putting on flesh to live among us, experiencing our joys and our sorrows shows that he “is a relational, deeply intimate Christ.” The deeply relational Christ works hard to connect to all people. He embodies radical solidarity with the marginalized, to be present with us in our lived experience. He connected not just with the wealthy, the powerful, and the deeply religious. He ate with sinners and prostitutes, healed lepers, engaged in conversation with the Samaritan woman, worked alongside zealots, fishermen and a tax collector. He raised up women and invited children to come unto him. He invited his disciples to not get caught up in the social distinctions of the day, but to be in ministry to all people, not just those in Jerusalem or Judea, but to Samaria and to the very ends of the earth.

The second theme today is of our inclusion as children of God. It is so unexpected. There has been nothing we have done to deserve being included as part of God’s family. How does it feel for you to know that you are a child of God’s? Philip D. Jamieson says: “This change in status implies a movement from outside the family to inside; it implies a new way of living, founded upon a new relationship to God and ultimately to all creation. The new status granted to those who have become God’s children through the agency of Jesus Christ has tremendous implications for congregational life.” Can we “recognize [our] new status and its gifted nature? Are [we] able to know and act according to the knowledge that the Creator God is also [our] loving Parent? So what does it mean for you to be included as a child of God? Does it make you feel special, loved, accepted, important?”

Philip D. Jameson also states, “A second and equally important question is also raised here. Founded upon the gracious knowledge that the Creator is also the loving Parent, are these children of God treating others in a new way? Once again, all too many Christians are happy to claim a new status, but are hesitant to treat others in a way consistent with that status. Those who are the children of God, those who have not labored for the new relationship, must be willing to view all others as potential children of God and therefore people of infinite value.” I believe this question and how we answer it affects our ability to be a truly inclusive community. How can we handle differences so that all experience welcome? All feel accepted? All are valued? All are loved?

Bringing back that the theme of Annual Conference and our fall church conference, how are we building the beloved community? I believe that beloved community practices radical hospitality, empathy and compassion. It blends faith and action. Being a beloved community means that we speak truth in love, defeating injustice through direct action. Our time together focuses on scripture, prayer and table fellowship. Through a backyard bbq, beloved community was built. Through the Word made flesh, we have experienced grace and truth. We have witnessed the creation of an imperfectly human built inclusive community. Because the Word came to dwell among us, we cannot live the same lives we did before. Because the Word was the light of all people, the brokenness of the world cannot overcome it. Through the Word, beloved community springs forth. The world will not necessarily know him or how we are to be in relationship with one another. But when we treat one another as beloved siblings in Christ, fellow children of God, then there is beloved community in action. I want to close today with a poem by a favorite United Methodist minister of mine, Rev. Jan Richardson. It is called “Blessed are you who bear the light.”

Blessed are you who bear the light in unbearable times, who testify to its endurance amid the unendurable, who bear witness to its persistence when everything seems in shadow and grief.

Blessed are you in whom the light lives, in whom the brightness blazes—your heart, a chapel, an altar where in the deepest night can be seen the fire that shines forth in you in unaccountable faith, in stubborn hope, in love that illumines every broken thing it finds.

In Our Prayers. Thanksgiving for: the gifts that make ministry possible, medical professionals and researchers. Holding in our hearts: those experiencing unemployment, those facing racial injustice and violence and cannot breathe under the weight of oppression, those grieving the loss of loved ones (Heidi and family in the loss of Millie), those experiencing illness or health issues - especially those who are ill with Covid-19 including George, and Sandy’s son and family, and (for Al (and family as they care for him), Dan D. (Vicki’s husband), Kelly R., Lindsey S., the Reim family and for Marge in hospice care), those in nursing homes or extended care facilities (Betty, Claire, Priscilla), those caring for others (Carrie G., Crystal, Rachel), the United Methodist Church. *Note that this list will renew each month.*

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² Book of Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals

Community Announcements

- **Pastor Christy's Sabbath.** Pastor Christy will be taking Sabbath time off from Tuesday, December 22nd until Monday, January 4th. Worship service coverage will be provided by Galen Schad on Sunday, December 27th and by Rev. Megan Stowe on Sunday, January 3rd. Mailings for both services will be sent out prior to Pastor Christy's vacation, so please hold onto them for each service. Pastoral coverage will be provided by Pastor Stacey Kullgren from the Congregational Church here in town until December 29th. She can be reached at either (508) 867-7078 or (603) 903-5621. From December 30th until January 4th, all pastoral calls should be directed to Rev. Megan Stowe at (508) 853-1895.
- **Christmas Eve Service - Remote Only.** Although it is heartbreaking to not be able to meet together this year for Christmas Eve, we remain distant from one another so that when we can gather, no one will be missing. This year's Christmas Eve service will be hosted by our Bishop and Cabinet as well as talented musicians from across our conference. It will be available online on our website at georgewhitefieldumc.weebly.com/worship-services and over the phone at (978) 990-5000, access code 719365#. Reach out if you need help accessing these services.
- **Heifer Project Conclusion.** Once we have a count of how much we raised, we'll include a list of animals/projects we could support, and we'll make decisions in January. Thank you for your support!
- **Giving Envelopes.** We have decided to forego giving envelopes for the year 2021, which will save the church about \$300. We invite you to continue mailing your offerings. Please reach out to Gail Sledziewski if you would like more information. You can mail your gifts to the church at PO Box 576, West Brookfield, MA 01585 or directly to Gail Sledziewski, PO Box 514, West Warren, MA 01092. Additionally, as a reminder, Gail has graciously given of her time over the past couple of years and is looking to step down from her position as Financial Secretary. Please reach out to Pastor Christy if you are interested in taking up this position, which involves receiving and counting offerings, making deposits, tracking giving, and sending reports to our Treasurer. Thank you!
- **Reopening Advisory Board Update.** Due to the continuing rise in cases of Covid-19, we have decided to keep our building closed until further notice. The Board will continue to meet on a monthly basis to reassess the ever-evolving situation. Please reach out to any member of the Trustees or Reopening Advisory Board if you have any questions or would like more information about how we can make indoor worship a possibility.
- **Music Ministry.** Our Music Director, Melissa, would love to connect with you to collaborate on musical offerings this coming season. If you would like to be a part of a singing opportunity, or would like to share your instrumental or dance offerings, reach out to her at mrsqpiano@gmail.com or (508) 246-8508.
- **Is Your Contact Information Up To Date?** Please let Jane Dolan know if your contact information has changed. In case of church cancellation or other circumstances, we would love to be able to get ahold of you.
- **Pastor Christy's Office Hours.** A reminder that Pastor Christy is available on Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 8 AM to 4 PM, Thursdays from 8 AM to 12 noon, and Sundays when we are gathering in-person from 8 AM to 10 AM. If you cannot reach her, and it is an emergency, please leave a message and she will get back to you asap.
- **Offerings** are still being encouraged during this time. Please consider mailing your offering to our church PO Box, so that we are able to continue in ministry through Christ for the transformation of the world. Offerings can be mailed to: George Whitefield United Methodist Church, PO Box 576, West Brookfield, MA 01585

Sonshine Phone Calls and Cards List

If you know of anyone who could be added to our Sonshine list, let Pastor Christy know.

Betty Hubbard
47 E Main St.
West Brookfield, MA 01585

Priscilla Toppin
47 E Main St.
West Brookfield, MA 01585

Kelly Rice
98 Lake Shore Drive
West Brookfield, MA 01585

Claire Wirf
(508) 791-8131
(mornings)
383 Mill Street
Worcester, MA 01602

Barbara Frazier
88 Masonic Home Rd.
Charlton, MA 01507

A Companion Guide

The Upper Room Daily Devotionals will return on January 11th. You are invited to pick a book of the Bible and join in a time of prayer at 9:30 AM daily.