

“MIRACLES”

Matthew 9:18-34 (p. 941)

In the 1970's rock opera "Jesus Christ Superstar" there is a scene so striking and so seared into my brain that, after thirty-some years, the mental picture is still vivid. A crowd of needy, hurting people press in on Jesus from all sides, clamoring and clawing for a healing touch from this miracle worker. Finally, evidently overwhelmed by all this human misery, Jesus screams, "*Heal yourselves!*" It's not a pleasant memory, and his anguished cry still upsets me whenever I think about it. But as I reflect on today's lesson, I can begin to understand why Tim Rice, the opera's lyricist, might have put those words in Jesus' mouth.

In our lesson today it seems as though every time he turns around Jesus runs into another blind person or a grieving parent or another man with a demon. On his way to the house of a dead girl he almost trips over yet another sick person. Things happen so quickly here that you might be tempted to conclude that this account is a bit contrived. After all, this couldn't have been a typical day for Jesus, could it? We might suspect that Matthew compressed things here to save space.

If we think that way it's probably because we usually do a good job of blocking out the hurting people around us. If we could see into the lives of people all around us the way God does, we might discover so much sorrow, sickness, grief, and despair that it would overwhelm us. I sometimes wonder what it must be like to be God; to sense every sigh, feel every heartache, and know every broken spirit of every person in the world – and all at the same time. I think you would have to be God just to be able to take all that in and not be overwhelmed by it.

Even so, I suspect we all know how other people's hurts do affect us. Who among us hasn't choked up at a memorial service, not so much because we were grieving, but because we saw people we care about who were grieving and it just got to us. You don't even have to know those who hurt. We recently saw the film "Kite Runner." While the story ends on a redeeming note, the grief and humiliation and tragedy it portrays made my heart ache. I wonder if I could take it emotionally if I had 24/7 access to the whimper of every orphan and every starving child whom war has ravaged? Add to that the cries of all the abused children who cower in corners, the distraught sobs of rape victims, the mutterings of Alzheimer's patients and those who have been robbed of their speech by strokes.

So do you suppose Matthew chapter 9 is an account of several days compressed for the sake of narrative expediency? I don't think so. If Jesus were to have strolled through the ER at RVMC on Friday night, it wouldn't have taken him long to encounter at least as much tragedy and need and sickness as we read about

in our lesson today. It wouldn't even need to be in a hospital. When it's God in the flesh walking around town, the solid walls go transparent, revealing us for the needy, hurting people that we are. When Jesus draws near, problems come out of the woodwork; but that's because they were in the woodwork all along. The reason we find so many sick and sad people around Jesus is because the needy are drawn to him as the one who can meet those needs. We can understand why they are all crying out for a miracle.

But as desirable as miracles may be, they can be problematic. In fact, I can think of several problems with miracles. For one thing, when you hear of a miracle happening, you tend to want one for yourself. That's especially true if you hear of the kind of miracle that you could really use. You're tempted to ask, "*Why him and not me?*" Then envy enters a picture where it doesn't belong. Another problem with miracles is that, frankly, they don't occur all that often. Face it; most people who pray for miracles don't get them. Does that suggest anything derogatory about our faith? Some people seem to think so. Another problem with miracles is that if we become preoccupied by them, we may be blinding ourselves to some spiritual realities that Jesus wants us to know.

Maybe you're uncomfortable with the idea that miracles should ever be considered a problem. Whether or not that's the case, it might be helpful to address some of the statements I just made. So first let me ask this: In the context of Jesus' ministry, what were miracles? The New Testament says that they were "signs" – arrows pointing us to the kingdom of God. Miracles were like little holes poked in the dark fabric that otherwise enshroud our lives, allowing momentary bright shafts of kingdom light to pierce our darkness. These signs were given to remind us that the way things often are in this life is not the way things are supposed to be, and in the long run, not the way things are going to be.

Miracles are kingdom previews; but they are only previews. The kingdom has not yet come in its fullness, which would explain why the people Jesus met did not end up experiencing an endless parade of one miracle after another. Jesus never promised his followers that they would live continuously within the cradle of the miraculous.

Nevertheless, the miracles Jesus performed really did happen. And when you couple that fact with the Bible verses that promise that our prayers really can be effective, the result is that many people throughout church history have tried to reduce miracles to some iron-clad equation, some reliable way to access these kingdom goodies. Typically we're told that the recipe for success goes something like this: strong faith plus vibrant prayer equals a miracle. A corollary to this equation is that if you cannot secure a miracle, it is obviously not God's fault. It's a result of your weak faith or lukewarm prayers.

Now, if that were true, we would have to conclude that there are very few strong Christians in the world. We know that is not the case. What's more, you would expect the gospels to be filled with far more miracles than are actually there. There are, in fact, about three dozen miracle stories recorded in the four gospels. That means there were far more people around Jesus who were not healed than those who were.

It's also wise to remember that Jesus resisted miracles on demand. He walked away when the crowds began clamoring for more miracles. And there are two other remarkable facts: First, Jesus usually told those who had received miracles to keep it quiet. The second fact is that simply seeing a miracle did not usually generate faith. Jesus typically performed miracles in response to faith that was already present; but the miracles themselves did not usually generate faith. That might explain why Jesus could impress people by raising Lazarus from the dead and still end up on a cross within the week. Maybe that's why, despite his wondrous signs, the Pharisees derided Jesus at the end of our lesson.

So what we have in these miracles are genuine kingdom previews. But these previews are not the way people come to saving faith. I'm sure Jesus didn't want his message to get swamped by miracles. He did not want people to believe chiefly because he could do some tricks. As it turned out, the deepest truth about Jesus would be revealed not in a miracle but on a cross. It was the death of Jesus, which despite his prayer in Gethsemane was not prevented by some miracle, that brings us to the heart of Jesus' saving purpose.

Years ago Lewis Smedes wrote about how it is natural to want healing for ourselves or for someone we love, and it's natural to pray for such things. But he also saw a spiritual danger in reducing the Christian life to mostly an exercise in seeking greater ease, comfort, and healing. Perhaps such preoccupation blinds us to the unalleviated suffering that is all around us, particularly among the poor and disenfranchised people who occupied such a central place in Jesus' ministry.

Sometimes I wonder how many people write to TV preachers asking them to pray for God's healing grace for the slum dwellers in Calcutta or Nairobi, and how many write asking for healing prayers for their bursitis. Smedes pointedly asks, how can we claim Jesus' power and presence for ourselves if we pay more attention to the alleviation of our own ailments than to the many others who suffer every day? How can we seek concentrated doses of Jesus' power if we do not first seek to have Jesus' heart for this world's suffering masses?

Jesus didn't claim God's healing power at a safe distance. He got so close to people living on the margins of society that he was defiled by them, according to the religious conventions of his day. He got touched by a menstruating woman, he held a dead girl, he reached out to touch lepers. These were quiet signs of God's glory in precisely the last places on earth where the religious folk of the time

thought religious folk belonged. If miracles were signs pointing us to the deeper realities of God's kingdom, then one of the directions in which we get pointed in the gospels is toward our being with the very people whom others mostly avoid. Jesus calls us to go to all kinds of people in order to show them that God loves them whether we can solve their every ill or not.

So where does all of that leave us? Let me close with three observations. First, given the sheer enormity of hurt in this world as I mentioned earlier, we are right to petition God for divine intervention. We should not stop praying for miracles, both the truly stunning as well as what we might call "ordinary" miracles that happen all the time but of which we are unaware: illnesses that don't take hold, accidents that don't happen, job interviews that are successful and provide our families with sustenance and income. Who knows the myriad ways God may well intervene in our lives every day as a result of our prayers. It's a hurting, dangerous world. Don't stop praying to God to make it better.

Second, if miracles are signs that point us to the nature of God's kingdom, then what we pray for should be consistent with that kingdom. That means that our prayers for God's intervention had better range far more widely than just our own aches and pains and sicknesses. Prayer includes those things, of course. But we need to broaden its reach to include the hurts of the poor, the suffering, the invisible people on the fringes of society. If Jesus were once more here in the flesh and was determined to provide some alleviating miracles for somebody, you have the feeling you know to which part of town he'd go first. What does that tell us about where our own prayers should likewise be directed?

Third, people who live under the sign of the cross need to be people who can and do have faith when no miracles come. And we need to nurture that kind of faith in others, as well. We can't make any sunny promises that if you become a Christian, all will be well from then on. Saint Augustine seemed to have been more taken by the miracles Jesus did not perform than the ones he did. The fact that Jesus kept the faith and pressed forward even after his prayer in Gethsemane was answered with a "No," has impressed many as a kind of miracle all its own. The fact that on the cross Jesus did not "call down twelve legions of angels" is a miracle of divine restraint for our good. Miracles just do not always come. The miracle of faith is its ability to hold on to God even so.

In our scripture lesson today, Barbara Brown Taylor wondered out loud what would have happened if, upon entering the room of the dead girl, Jesus had done no more than closed her little eyes with his fingertips and offered a prayer to God for her safekeeping in the divine arms. Suppose Jesus had done that and then said to her father, "*Have faith in me: I am the resurrection and the life. This death is not the end for your little girl.*" If her father had responded in faith even in the absence of a miracle, would not his faith itself be a grand miracle?

The sacrifice Jesus made to save us by grace, and the gift of faith that ties us into that salvation, that is its own kind of miracle in a world bent on death. Let's never stop praying for miracles of the kingdom; never stop hoping that still more holes can be punched in the fabric of this dark world so that the light of the kingdom can stream in. But let's never lose our focus that the kingdom joy must come for all. And let's never forget that sometimes, maybe most of the time, a faith that endures when there is nothing more to go on than the Lord's promise may just be the grandest miracle of all.

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