

March 19, 2006

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The Seven Miracles of Jesus: 3. Healing the Nobleman's Son

John 4:51-54

Dr. Wantz is exploring the major miracle stories within the New Testament this season of Lent and as a part of that series we investigate the miracle of a healing by Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of John this morning. This story is ancient and has been told through the ages in our faith tradition.

However, this week, I read about a miracle concerning another John. The sudden recovery of a young French nun suffering from Parkinson's disease is being called a miracle performed by Pope John Paul following his death. Though I am not clear on the whole process toward sainthood in the catholic tradition, I do know that there is an official inquiry into this healing and it could definitely affect John Paul's fast track toward his canonization. According to the article that I read from an associated press writer, "Exactly two months after the death of the pope, from one minute to another, the nun didn't show the symptoms of the illness any more. According to the criteria of human science, the doctor couldn't give an explanation of what happened."

The nun was suffering with the realities of Parkinson's disease one minute and the next minute she was not. The article used the term "alleged miracles" at one point in referring to such experiences around the world. I was caught by that word "alleged." I tend to think of alleged with suspected criminals and their alleged crimes. When it comes to miracles though, alleged does not seem to fit. I can't imagine that nun uses the word "alleged" to describe her experience. I imagine she has jumped for joy and shouted, "Thanks be to God, let's have a celebration!"

There is much in this world that is "unexplainable" and when it happens and brings us something good, let's dance for days and celebrate our blessings! Alleged - are you kidding? She was sick and now she's well. Even if it only lasts for a short time - what an incredible gift!

May we hold this nun from France in our hearts as we offer our gratitude to God. Let's pray: Gracious God for all those times in life that we feel your presence and your loving intervention - we offer our deep and abiding gratitude. Stir your spirit anew within us this morning that we might be refreshed and energized by your grace. May each one of us hear in this ancient miracle story a word of hope for our lives and for the world. Amen

Over the years people in various congregations have come to tell me a secret. They tend to arrive looking over their shoulders to make sure no one is watching. I usually assume that they are going to tell me some wrong that they have committed in their life and possibly share their regret. But, no, almost always, what they are so reluctant to tell me is not some wrong doing, but rather something very right, something that they perceive as a miracle, a miraculous encounter with God. For the most part, they come to me to help them rationalize their experience in some way to make sense scientifically, or to get my permission to dismiss their encounter altogether. Their greatest fear, I suppose, is that I might suggest they are unbalanced or mentally ill, in need of one of those white jackets that tie in the back because they are already suspecting that might be true. Down deep

inside they cannot dismiss their encounter, yet they cannot accept it either. They are between the proverbial rock and a hard place. What they want is relief. What they need is to accept a radical trust in a loving God.

Why are we so skeptical about miracles? Why are we so eager to diminish or dismiss an encounter with the Divine? The unexplained can and does happen, but our analytical brains want concrete, scientific explanations for all things in life. I, for one, never diminish or dismiss a miraculous experience. Whenever we encounter the Divine it is miraculous, not to be hidden, but to be shared openly. When we come face to face with the incredible, the indescribable, the miraculous, we should race out onto the limb of faith and sit there with Jesus and do our best to describe the experience. By all means, jump for joy, offer gratitude to God and demand a celebration!

I heard a report on the internet this week about an accident in New York where a tractor trailer careened across several lanes of traffic smashing a car into the concrete median. If that wasn't bad enough, there was a bus in far left lane and after the car was hit by the semi, driven into the concrete wall, the car was then plowed over by the bus. The picture of the mangled car made it look about the size of a postage stamp. We all know in an accident like that several lives are likely to be lost. Yet, in this horrific accident no one died. The driver of the car has a herniated disk in his neck, a couple of pinched nerves and some scratches. No broken bones. No apparent internal injuries. I really loved the interview with the driver of the car. He is an Audi car dealer and though he did feel that this was a miracle, he was quick to also credit his Audi. I am sure there is a commercial for his dealership in that interview somewhere. He should be dead, but he is alive. It defies reason! It is a miracle. Miracle is the only language we have for this event.

When a person is suffering from a chronic debilitating disease and then finds healing – it is a miracle. Whenever a driver walks away from a devastating accident where clearly no one should have survived –it is miraculous. When a relationship that was broken beyond repair and then is restored- it is a miracle. This very day and our very lives are miraculous! There are reversals; there are surprises, and realities that we just cannot explain. Miracle is the only word expansive enough to cover this kind of wonder, this kind of mystery in life.

A nun was ill and now is well –for her, it is a miracle. No one will ever be able to tell her differently.

A man's son is near death and then by the mere word of Jesus is healed – it is a miracle. All too often, we settle for diminishing what is clearly miraculous.

Of course we do not all engage Scripture in the same way and we do not all engage life in the same way. I don't think it matters much if everyone lines up on the side of accepting miracles literally or not. You may have a long list of encounters with the Divine that you call miracles in your own life – great! You may not be able to think of a single experience in your life that you would file under miraculous– that's fine too. We all encounter the Divine in different ways. Some of us will encounter God more through our reason than experience; others of us are far more experiential in our relationship with God. But the beauty of it is we do not have to relate to God in only one way. God comes to us where we are and the way we are wired. That's the gift, God relates to all of us in different ways. Taking the miracle stories symbolically may speak to you, embracing the miracles literally may be essential to your faith. All is well as long as we do not insist that everyone

encounter the Divine exactly as we do. God is greater than a one size fits all experience. The presence of God comes to us in many different ways.

What strikes me in this miracle story is not only that a son experiences healing, but that this father takes Jesus at his word. The man listened to Jesus and believed.

Scholars think that this father was an official in Herod's court. The father was probably a Jew rather than a Roman. Here we have a man with some power and prestige in his own society who races twenty miles to ask for the help of a carpenter from Nazareth. Jesus was a radical in the eyes of many devout Jews and ultimately painted as an enemy of the state of Rome. Yet, this father, who could find no other way to help his son, travels about twenty miles to ask this stranger for his son's life. Twenty miles - on foot - we are talking several hours of travel. This father, desperate to save his son, reaches out to Jesus as his last resort. His request is that Jesus travel to his home in Capernaum with him. But, Jesus merely offers these few words, "You may go, your son will live." That's it. Jesus does not go to Capernaum. For most of us, the seven words of Jesus would not have been enough for us to accept. Most of us would have begged, dragged, and arrested Jesus if necessary to get what we wanted. This father does get that which he requested and yet on the words of Jesus he is satisfied. He only wants the health of his son restored and he takes Jesus at his word.

He takes Jesus at his word. It should become my mantra - take Jesus at his word because for me, that is the real miracle. We sit here, many of us Christians for decades, even more of us brought up in the faith since childhood, but deep down we continue to struggle to truly take Jesus at his word. We have those nagging questions about what is literally true in the bible and what is narrative. We wonder what is culturally bound in scripture and what is the essence of Jesus' message. We acknowledge that God might love our neighbor, our really good, really faithful, really pious neighbor, but question how God could love some of our other neighbors. Eager to hold onto our flaws and the flaws of others we cling to a works-righteous theology that never really embraces the depth of God's love for anyone. We look at the evil in the world and wonder why God would choose to love our enemies. We look in the mirror and weigh all the negatives in our lives and question the depth of God's love for us.

And when we hear about a miracle, we have the question in the back of our mind - why not me, why not my miracle - be that a request for ourselves or a loved one.

That father took Jesus at his word.

Imagine what life would be like if we did take Jesus at his word. Imagine how we would live if we truly accepted as our own Jesus' words to:

Turn the other cheek, go the second mile

Offer forgiveness

Embrace the forgiveness that God offers us

Pray for our enemies

Give to the needy without fanfare

Do not judge others

Know that God is with us

God loves you

With God all things are possible

Love yourself
 Love others
 You are the light of the world

These are just a few of the words of Jesus. The miracle in this story for me is that a father, an official in the government, a man that could provide for his family and even had a relationship that might offer protection with his oppressors the Romans, opened his heart to the promises of God in the person of Jesus. Had his son recovered or not, it would still be a miracle for me. For I believe that there is healing in this life and in the life beyond this life. So, the healing for his son would come either way. It is the radical trust in one so unlikely that surprises me with grace.

Marcus Borg, theologian and professor at Oregon State University says that faith is what you turn to when knowledge runs out. One of the components of faith according to Borg is trust, a radical trust in God. This man, this father had that radical trust. He could do no more to help his son so he raced to the one person in the world that he thought might be able to change his circumstances. He went to Jesus. He put aside all his doubts and questions, he does not care what others will think, he literally places his trust in Jesus' word.

Will you take Jesus at his word?

The nun in France has had an unexplainable encounter with God; a man whose car was mangled beyond belief, lives to tell the story. It happens all the time in a multitude of ways to people every day. Words fail us to express these experiences. Do not slink away from them, do not try to diminish them, do not keep them a secret in fear that someone else will mock you, or criticize you, and do not run from them because they make you uneasy. Every time we take Jesus at his word it is miraculous. It means that we have set aside our need for control, put on the shelf our need for scientific explanation and for that moment in time we trust, we completely, radically trust in the love of God.

Every time we open our heart to the love of God we create a place and will most assuredly be surprised by grace. It does not mean that our every wish will be granted, for the Divine is not our fairy Godmother, but it does mean that no matter what our circumstances, if our hearts and our minds are open, we will have the sense of the presence of the Divine holding us as we live through our challenges.

If we allow them, the mere words of Jesus can shape our living profoundly.

I have a friend in Kansas, Gary Cox, who is a minister serving a congregational church. My friend is this dynamic, high energy, progressive thinker. He is a leader in the community as well as his church. Last winter, Gary began to lose weight and though like most people, he was glad to be dropping a few pounds, he was concerned that he could find no explanation for the loss. So, after a few weeks of losing weight, he went to his family doctor. Within a matter of days, my forty-nine year old friend, Gary discovered he had advanced renal cancer. Though his chances for survival were very small, he chose to have the cancerous kidney removed and to begin treatment. After the removal of his kidney, his oncologist told Gary that he would not live to see the 4th of July, but that he would see Gary in a few weeks to discuss pain management. Gary was not ready to accept this line of thinking, so he went online into cyber-space and began to talk to people who had a similar

diagnosis. He found an experimental treatment in Kansas City and immediately began that treatment.

Gary is still alive. It is March and Gary is still alive. Gary has had nine more months of life than he expected. That for me is a celebration, but the real miracle for me is that Gary who is definitely dying has taken Jesus at his word. He believes in his heart that God is with him and loving him through this crisis. He is so confident in God's love that Gary has been truly empowered and energized in the midst of his terrible treatments. Gary has preached every Sunday that he possibly could during the last nine months. Gary completed his Doctorate degree during this time and was graduated with that degree. Gary has continued his ministry duties and just this week, I received in the mail the book that Gary has written and had published since he became ill.

I cannot begin to describe how ill Gary's treatments have made him. He is gaunt and thin. He has cancer throughout his entire system. Yet, because he takes Jesus at his word, each day and this gift of time have been filled with creativity and productivity. Gary is truly letting his light shine for as long as he possibly can. Meeting Gary is an encounter with the love of God, the glory of God shining right through him. On days when most of us would stay in bed, he is out making a difference in this world.

Imagine life if we were to truly take Jesus at his word. Our efforts would be less about controlling our circumstances, less in judging others and promoting ourselves, and more in letting the love of God shine through us.

The father took Jesus at his word and his life was forever changed. It says at the end of the passage, that he, his family and his whole household believed. They built a life based on seven words of Jesus. They shaped the rest of their days on the promises of God.

Brennan Manning has written a book entitled, *Ruthless Trust*, in which he writes, "Ruthless trust is an unerring sense, way deep down that beneath the surface agitation, boredom and insecurity of life, it's gonna be all right. Ill winds may blow, more character defects may surface, sickness may visit, and friends will surely die, but stubborn irrefutable certainty persists that God is with us and loves us in our struggle to be faithful."

A father trusted completely the word of Jesus and it changed his life completely. How about you? Is there the possibility of a place in your life this day, where you can put your trust in a word of Jesus and allow that holiness to shine through you this day? Just imagine how a radical trust in the words of Jesus might change your life. It's a miracle in the making! And when it happens, leap for joy, offer your gratitude to God and by all means, demand a celebration! If you cannot find someone to celebrate with you, by all means call me!

Marcus Borg says "Thin places are places where the veil momentarily lifts, and we behold God, experience the one in whom we live, all around us and within us."

Sitting in that doorway at 4:30 in the morning was a thin place for me. I knew that nothing I could do could save my child and so I was completely open to the promises of God.

I had preached assurance in my ministry, but it was not until January of 1994 that I finally took Jesus at his word. Assurance for me is not so much a doctrine of personal salvation, but rather the

assurance that God is with us always and we are loved, no matter what. I knew it to be true theologically and intellectually, but it was in the doorway of our home at 4:30 in the morning in 1994 that that truth became essential to my very being. I was sitting in the dark in the doorway of the bedroom with our daughter, Lori, who was nine sitting in my lap while our house was being tossed around like a basketball. We were in the midst of a violent earthquake in Granada Hills, California a suburb of Los Angeles and next to Northridge. It was so dark that even though she was sitting in my lap on the floor, I could not see my daughter's head only inches from my face. I was sure that we would both die. I could hear the house falling apart all around us. I could hear explosions in the distance. I could not imagine how anyone would survive this trauma. Lori and I sat in that doorway, my husband Randy was stuck out in Michigan in a blizzard - a bad day for all of us - but as we sat in that doorway, I knew we were dead and I knew really for the first time in my life, I trusted in my head and my heart that we were in God's good hands no matter what happened. I had no thought that we could survive. My only hope was that I might be able to use my body to shield my daughter and she might somehow live. We sang "Jesus loves me" as we sat in the doorway through the initial earthquake and the violent aftershocks that followed one after the other. For once, the control freak that I am took Jesus at his word - he was with us and he would love us through this no matter what the outcome. The miracle was not that we lived; the miracle was that both of us were confident in God's grace in the process. The hero in this story is not me, it is not Lori, it is God. God who follows through with the promises made to Abraham, and Moses, and Jacob. Promises made through Jesus. Promises that are as old as time and yet fully trustworthy right now. God filled that thin space and enabled us to cope through the original trauma of the earthquake and then continued to fill the thin space in the recovery. Had we not had the promise that God is always with us, I think I would have died of fright.

Assurance that God is with us, assurance from the top of my head to the tip of my toes, assurance that no matter what I do or say, assurance that no matter how many mistakes I make, assurance is now the foundation of my spirituality, a constant in my life. I know it now not just intellectually, but also I know it heartfully, soulfully and eternally.

We lived - a miracle. Our neighbors lived - a miracle. To my utter astonishment - most people did live. But the miracle was no less true for those who died; God was with them as well. God surrounded them with God's love of that I am sure. There was a moment in time in that community where our knowledge had run out and for a brief and beautiful few weeks, there was a communal radical trust in God. It seemed every sentence began with Thanks to God. It did not matter if the person speaking taught Sunday school or never set foot in a church, the entire community was in a thin place - an encounter with God.

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