

April 9, 2006

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The Seven Miracles of Jesus: 6. The Lame Walk

John 5:6-9

Somewhere along the way we'll connect the miracle of the lame man who was given the ability to walk with the imagery of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The idea we're working with as we continue the series on miracles is that sometimes miracles take place despite our best efforts to frustrate their completion. In number six of the seven miracles that John's Gospel uses to validate the son of God status of Christ, Jesus is entering into one of the gates of the city of Jerusalem. The crowds that will greet him in a few years when he returns and enters the city again aren't around because his abilities and identity have yet to be revealed.

And so, in relative anonymity, Jesus approaches the watering pool called Bethzatha that has gained a reputation for healing powers. A second century tradition would explain that it was an angel's bathing in the pool that disturbed that water giving it the power to heal whoever was the first to enter in. The pool, then, was lined with dozens and dozens of hurting people waiting and watching to fling themselves in at the first sign of troubled waters. Perhaps that alone can give us another insight into the anatomy of a miracle...that it's only when the waters are troubled that the stage is set for a miracle to take place.

Near this pool Jesus comes across a man lying down who'd been ill for thirty-eight years and sensing he'd been there for a long time asks, *"Do you want to be made well?"* We're all in on it in the sense of knowing what Jesus has the ability to do, but the man doesn't, so he simply explains his problem in getting to the healing waters. With that Jesus tells the man, *"Stand up, take your mat and walk."* While walking around, some religious leaders recognize him, probably because they've been accustomed to seeing him by the Bethzatha pool for many years. They ask, *"What are you doing? Carrying your mat on the Sabbath is considered work and work on the Sabbath is against the rules."* The man explains what's happened...a miracle!

What is absolutely amazing about this story is that the religious authorities aren't upset or curious about the fact that this man has been cured. They are completely absorbed by the fact that it took place on the Sabbath...a day when such activities were forbidden. If it had been on a Monday or Tuesday it probably wouldn't have gotten any airtime, but in this case rules were broken. How dare Jesus heal on the Sabbath!

This kind of mindset still persists today; another example of how the Gospel remains relevant through the ages. Folks can't see the goodness or the miracle because they've been blinded by the rules. We can think of the case of Elliot Voge, a 14 year old student in Warren Township who was suspended for ten days for doing the right thing. Finding a pocketknife in his coat pocket while entering school, he decided to turn it in at the office knowing that knives were banned from school property. "Sorry kid, you carried a knife into this building on the Sabbath...a school day...so you're suspended. You broke the rules."

In spite of the rules and parameters we set...in spite of ourselves good things and miracles will happen. Nonetheless we can still persist in attempts to frustrate the emergence of those miracles, among them such things as excuses.

For example, there is another way we can analyze the response of the lame man to Jesus' question, "Do you want to be made well?" He has, after all, been lame for 38 years. He has his routine. He is a part of the Bethzatha pool community. He is a part of the network of people who receive alms and food from the Good Samaritans who care for the afflicted. If he is healed, that comfortable way of life will end. He'll be expected to get a job and fend for himself.

So he avoids Jesus' question, *"I've no one to carry me to the healing waters. Others always get there first."* Secretly he's just fine with that arrangement for he doesn't want to be healed. Actually there is no indication of joy when he discovers he can walk. There is no gratitude expressed toward Jesus for what he has done. When he learns that it was Jesus who healed him the scripture says that he goes to the religious authorities to point him out. "That's the one who did this to me," he tells them. It's every bit as possible he was speaking those words with contempt rather than excitement.

In that regard, we can possess that same mindset of the lame man. When asked if we want to be made well the answer is really, "no." We like the eating or the drinking that is taking a toll on our health or we've grown accustomed to all the attention and perks we get because of our affliction. There is a medical term for people who, rather than making up symptoms, actually do all they can to ensure that an illness persists so they can continue to get the attention and the treatment. They don't want a miracle, they're content with the life situation they have.

Beside excuses, another way we attempt to frustrate the emergence of miracles is through suppression. It's a broad brush stroke that can cover anything from the deliberate to the unintentional, yet more often than not we know we are suppressing something that can work for good.

Take this week's public presentation of an early Christian document called the Gospel of Judas purporting that Judas Iscariot was not the betrayer of Jesus but a willing

collaborator and favorite disciple. It was actually discovered in the 1970s in a cave in Egypt. Through the years it has had quite a journey; sold in 1978 to an Egyptian antiquities dealer in Cairo, offered for sale to scholars in a hotel room in Geneva in 1983, offered again in 1984 in New York and then stored in a safety deposit box in New York for sixteen years when the deal fell through. In 2000 a Zurich antiquities dealer bought it after tracking it down and offered it to the Yale University Rare Book Library that verifies it is the only known copy of the Gospel of Judas. Yale declines the purchase because the price is too high. In 2001 the dealer donated it to a foundation for ancient art in Switzerland that translates and conserves the manuscript. In 2004 it is donated to the Coptic Museum of Cairo that agrees to take possession after it has been exhibited to the public. In 2005 carbon dating of the paper established that it was transcribed around 300 A.D. and this past week its pages are finally unveiled publicly for the first time in Washington, D.C.

Whew! I'm sure it has captured the public's attention because it has all the ingredients of a Dan Brown Da Vinci Code novel. Hinting at the Catholic Church suppression theme found in Brown's book, a priest who is a member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission stated for the New York Times, *"I'm just glad it wasn't found in a bank vault in the Vatican."* Leave it to the media to get to the heart of the matter printing some of the key phrases of the gospel; *"Jesus said to him, 'Step away from the others and I shall tell you the mysteries of the kingdom. It is possible for you to reach it, but you will grieve a great deal. For someone will replace you, in order that the twelve disciples may again come to completion with their God.'" Jesus also tells Judas, "You will exceed the other disciples."*

I'm not suggesting that the truth has been suppressed, but I am using this story to demonstrate how we simply can't suppress, intentionally or unintentionally the height and depth of the Christian experience and tradition. In the long run it really doesn't matter whether Judas was a betrayer or a favored one; the miracle of the resurrection still happened, it was destined to take place.

Harry Emerson Fosdick used an image of the power of faith that can certainly apply to the persistency of miracles to emerge in spite of what we do. He speaks of watching a child trying to hold a beach ball underwater in a swimming pool. At first the child is successful but after a time it become more difficult to hold the ball under. Its forces to reach the surface are too strong and eventually it pops to the surface. The same could be said of miracles. Despite our best efforts to suppress them, their forces are too strong. They will eventually emerge.

And in terms of why we are here and what we are celebrating today, Christ's entry into Jerusalem could be akin to his saying or God saying, *"something marvelous and miraculous is about to happen, ready or not, willing or not, here it comes!"*

