

28-Jun-2015 Sermon

“Miracles, Feelings, Imagination”

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Text: Mark 5:21-43

This is a sermon about spiritual engineering.

I’m sorry to announce that we have to start with the difference between a Latin word and a Greek word. The English word *miracle* comes from the Latin word *miraculum*, which means a wonder or a marvel. From this vantage point, a newborn baby is a wonder, and therefore a miracle. But we also mean by *miracle* an event that passes human powers and is caused by something supernatural.

I understand that a lot of people have a lot of trouble with miracles—with events that cannot be explained without bringing in the supernatural. It’s like you’re standing there, just trying to understand a little bit of the universe, trying to empirically understand cause and effect, and then, *wham*, someone throws the concept of the miraculous your way. It’s like a Frisbee that hits you in the head when you’re thinking about something else. “I was in a hurry to get home, and was coming up to a red light, and then, voila—the light turns to green! It was a miracle!” Really? A miracle? Maybe you mean “statistically improbable event.”

Of course, the question as to if miracles happened in the New Testament is different from the question as to if miracles occur in these days.

The Greek word in Matthew, Mark and Luke to describe what we call miracles is *dunameis*, from which we get the English word *dynamite*. *Dunameis* is literally “acts of power.” So when we read the healing accounts in the Synoptic gospels, such as the two in our lesson for today, we tend to see them as unexplainable marvels while the first century writers saw them as acts of power. The distinction is important.

To understand the perspective of the gospel writers around acts of power and the Messiah, we have to turn to Isaiah. He writes the color commentary on the gospels, which is truly amazing because, depending on when you date the writing of the book of Isaiah, he wrote hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus. Isaiah writes this about the Messiah: “The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord” (Isaiah 11). “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for prisoners” (Isaiah 61). And in the Psalm of Solomon: “God has made him strong in the Holy Spirit and wise in counsel with power and righteousness. And the good pleasure of the Lord is with him in strength and he will not be weak... strong is he in his works and mighty in the fear of God” (Ps. Sol 17).

So in the gospels, the Holy Spirit and power are inseparably connected. In addition, the Messiah and the Holy Spirit are inseparably connected. And the mission of the Messiah is to deliver and to bind up the brokenhearted. The miracles of Jesus are thus the fruit of the power that goes along with His existence. What we see in the healing miracles as a *scientific* problem—namely, how a girl be raised from the dead or a woman instantly healed from chronic bleeding?, the gospel writers saw as an *engineering* phenomenon, namely having to do with the power of God, which is the Holy Spirit, in great quantity on the Anointed One, the Christ, whose mission includes compassion, healing and salvation. Scientists wonder, how can it happen? Engineers wonder, what will happen?

You may not believe in miracles—as I said, it can sometimes feel like a Frisbee hitting you alongside the head—but to take away from Jesus the freedom and authority to do acts of power means that you’re trying to break that unbreakable connection in Isaiah (and other prophecies) and in the New Testament between the Messiah, the Holy Spirit, and the acts of power. Take away one of those three, and the other two fall apart. Jesus *is* the divine miracle. As Luke says in the book of Acts, “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and... he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him” (Acts 10:38). Jesus *is* the divine miracle.

In the story of the woman with the chronic bleeding, we see this ability to do acts of power with a unique description. Mark and Luke describe power as a *substance*. “[The woman with the bleeding] had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak.... Immediately her hemorrhage stopped....” Jesus then asked who had touched Him because He was “[i]mmediately aware that power had gone forth from him.” Not *the* power had gone forth from him; not *some of the power that Jesus had, which was a subset of God’s power*; not *the power of Jesus, which was alongside other powers, such as people power, angelic power and even demonic power*. Mark and Luke mean power in the absolute. “Power had gone forth from him.” Jesus bears absolute power. Jesus uses absolute power.

However, there are certainly things we can learn from these passages that have nothing to do with miracles or the miraculous. The main point of the healing stories is about power and compassion, but they are about other things as well. The first learning is about the emotional life, namely, “Don’t let feelings fail.” Jesus didn’t. Jairus with the sick daughter asks for His help; Jesus is filled with compassion and He turns to help. Let’s contrast that to the people at the house of the sick girl, who is now dead. When Jesus enters the house, He tells the mourners there, “‘Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.’ And they laughed at him.” Despite the fact that it may be unwise to laugh at a holy man who can wield the power of God, at the very least this is a time of great suffering: laughing is not appropriate; laughing is disrespectful. Don’t let feelings fail.

The greatest way we can let our feelings fail is in our sentimentality. Most particularly, in our reading of the Bible. We might love these stories as a sentimentalist, which is, according to Oscar Wilde, someone who wants the luxury of an emotion without paying for it. We sentimentalists are like the bargain shoppers in the emotional life—we want rich feelings without the investment of compassion or the willingness to suffer. Take Christmas for example. Now like everyone else I love Christmas, especially the cookies. We love the Christmas story, don’t we? The no room in the inn and the singing angels, the star of Bethlehem, the shepherds, the animals, the manger and the wise men. And the little drummer boy. Think about that. Here’s a new mother who has just gone through 12 or 24 or 36 hours of labor, and in walks a kid with a drum.

But the most important fact about Christmas has to do with *power*. The most important fact about Christmas is that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. That He was associated with power from the

moment of His conception. It's time to let Jesus grow up. Time to purge out our sentimentality when we read His stories and to work to feel more deeply than we have ever felt before, when we read.

Sentimentality, according to Wallace Stevens, the 20th century American poet, is the failure of feeling. As such, a cynic can be as sentimental as Pollyanna, although negative rather than positive. When we're cynical we're failing in our feelings. We fail in our feelings when we try to get on with life too quickly after loss. We fail in our feelings when we pass by too quickly those who are in hardship, or even those who are celebrating.

Terrible tragedy in Charleston. Terrible. There's always that urge to make life go on, to talk about gun control or mental illness or even racism. All critically important topics. But we don't need to go on so quickly to topics. Let your feelings linger. Practice deeper and wider, like swimming: deeper, wider, longer. Emotionally stay when others have gone and when you, too, feel the tug. Whatever you have to go to can wait. Feel the terror in Charleston. Let feelings linger. Because we will be more likely to help when your feelings don't fail.

The second learning from the healing stories—in terms of learnings that don't have much to do with miracles—is similar to the first. Namely, “Don't let the imagination fail.” Jairus, the father with the sick daughter, imagines that Jesus might be able to heal her. The woman with the chronic bleeding imagines that if she can just touch the hem of the garment of Jesus, she will be healed. In contrast, the people who come from the house of Jairus tell him that his daughter has died. And, Don't trouble Jesus any more about it. This *just after* the woman with the chronic bleeding has told her story to the crowd: her condition, her suffering, her faith—her imagination—and the fact that she could feel in her body that she was now healed. Just after she has told her story, these people come and, showing a complete lack of imagination, tell Jairus that his daughter is dead and not to trouble Jesus any more. After all, according to them, Jesus probably had more important things to do than to comfort this family. But Jesus was active. Jesus wielded the power of God and the imagination of God. He told Jairus, do not fear, only believe. He told Jairus, do not let the imagination fail.

And Jesus is active still, isn't He? This, too, is a time for all of us to imagine the work of God at Christ Episcopal Church in Anacortes, Washington. One of the reasons I proposed to Becky—and I think it's a great reason to propose to someone—is that I didn't want to miss out. I had feelings and I had imagination, and although I couldn't predict the future, I was certain that life with her was going to be something that I didn't want to miss out on. And I was right. And it's the same way here at Christ Episcopal—we can be those who say, “Don't trouble Jesus. In fact, don't trouble anybody. It's not worth it.” In other words, we can be like the cynics, who, to quote Oscar Wilde again, know the price of everything and the value of nothing. But let's not be cynical *or* sentimental. I suggest that we trouble Jesus, that we stir the pot, that we cause some Episcopal mischief. Let's not live the uncomplicated emotional lives that we did as children. Let's not let feelings fail. And in the same way, let's not let the imagination fail, like the people who laughed at Jesus. It was inappropriate, but it was also... unimaginative. Because life at this church, and compassion at this church, and the family of this church... is not something you want to miss out on.