

“The Trouble with Miracles” \* a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey  
Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive Presbyterian church 6/28/2009

TEXT Mark 5:21-43 When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, ‘My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.’ So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, ‘If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.’ Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, ‘Who touched my clothes?’ And his disciples said to him, ‘You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, “Who touched me?”’ He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.’ While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader’s house to say, ‘Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?’ But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, ‘Do not fear, only believe.’ He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, ‘Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.’ And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, ‘Talitha cum’, which means, ‘Little girl, get up!’ And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

SOME MONTHS AGO Maureen asked me to talk on miracles – genuine inexplicable graces or confluence of events that yield a blessing far beyond coincidence, far beyond logic or expectation. Miracles -- extraordinary events manifesting divine intervention, a fulfillment of spiritual law. And miracles do happen. She had experienced a miracle, a true miracle, when against all odds, she and her husband not only found a house in the exact neighborhood they wanted, they qualified for the mortgage. For her, it was everything she wanted, and nothing she expected to be able to have. She never stops giving thanks, being appreciative. Do others experience miracles, she wondered? What are they? How do they process it? What does it mean for them?

Last week we witnessed the miracle of Jesus stilling a terrifying storm. This morning we have heard about the surprise healing of woman with a 12-year issue of blood and the death and raising of the daughter of Jairus. In all three what appear to be insurmountable physical and social obstacles are overcome to make room for newness of life. They are spectacular evidences of the ability of God to overcome odds. They offer wonderful comfort in watching Jesus still the storm heal the sick, and raise the dead; there is genuine hope that this great power is available to us through our kinship with Jesus. Miracles are living proof that God’s will for us is not chaos but wholeness; and every miracle proclaims that truth.

But –the trouble with miracles is that it is hard not to want one of our own. Every one of us has prayed, at one time or another for a true miracle. Every one of us knows someone who is suffering, who is hurting, who is terrified, who could use a true miracle. Some of you may have seen excerpts of the documentary actress Farah Fawcett made about her struggle with cancer. She said, "I do not want to die of this disease. So I say to God, 'It is seriously time for a miracle.'" Her faith was strong. Her miracle never came.

Who gets the miracles and who does not? There are so many people in my life to whom I have wanted Jesus to say, "Talitha Koum!" Little one, arise. There are others who I have so much wanted to be able to touch the robe of Jesus and be healed. But neither cure nor solace ever came. And then, what do we do with the many people who get a miracle without asking at all?!

In the apparent randomness it is tempting to look for a formula. We comb the miracle stories to find out who did what right and who did what wrong so that we can learn from their experience. What must *we* do to become irresistible to God? Do we need two parts prayer, three parts faith, one part good works? Or four parts faith, two parts prayer, no points for good works?

In our earnestness, it is too easy to come up with a formula that says, if you will just believe hard enough, your prayers will be answered. If your faith is strong enough - your faith will make you well. If you only had faith - you would find a better job, earn more money, get into that school, have a handsome car. Some of our more rigid churches or denominations go one step further, and try to regulate not only the quality of our faith but the content of our faith. Some believers would have you pass a test of orthodoxy, before God's miracles are available to you.

The truth is, I believe we have gotten mixed up about what causes miracles. We are tempted to think that faith make miracles happen. We are apt to think that miracles work along the same lines as those strength tests you used to see at county fair, the ones that looked like big the moments and if you can hit the bottom with a sledgehammer hard enough, you could ring the bell and win a prize. In other words, we think miracles are something we can control. If you are sick and getting sicker, you must pray harder, try harder, ramp up the volume, impress God with the power of your belief and claim the miracle as your reward.

Only this is idolatry. This is a mind game.

Did Jairus' daughter have faith? I don't think so. She was on her way out of the world. Did Jairus have faith? Mark never said so. Jairus just followed Jesus home and watched that unclean man do his work.

I don't think Maureen would tell you that her prayers obtained her home. I do think she would say there was some sort of divine intervention and she and her family were blessed, graced, endowed, and she remains grateful.

The belief that you can earn a miracle is one more pitiful attempt to work things around so we seem to be in charge of our lives, instead of owning up to the truth that every single breath we take is a free surprise from God. Faith does not work miracles. God does. To concentrate on the strength of our own belief is to practice magic. To concentrate on the strength of God is to practice faith. This is not just semantics. This is the difference between believing our lives are in our own hands and believing they are in God's. God, not faith, works miracles.

There is another trouble with miracles. Not only do we think we can control them, too often we think we can define them. We think we know what the cure is. We think we know what health and wholeness look like. But miracles come in many ways. A colleague of mine has struggled with depression for most of his life. Just this month he got a new diagnosis: "treatment-resistant clinical depression"! Yet he recently shared this prayer: "Caring God, your grace is sufficient for me. Show me how I can use this weakness to serve you better." He feels his darkness, while not relieved, leads him to an empathy and vulnerability that God can use. His feeling of usefulness has become far more significant than his feeling of hopelessness.

I have spoken about my own struggles with addiction, and most of us in a 12-step program would say that our delivery was God's miracle. There is no cure for addiction, only deliverance, only daily choice to live in the freedom of sobriety and in the surrender to God's care. That is the true miracle. God continues to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. God cares.

A dear friend of mine is struggling mightily with the threat of divorce, with betrayal and despair. Yet she is discovering treasures in her darkness, new understandings about herself and her own demons, that she calls miracles. And they are.

For those of you who carry secret pains - whether physical, psychological or emotional - remember that God does love you. If your prayers for healing are not being answered according to your agenda, perhaps it is time to turn your pain over to God and see what miracles there are of which we can not yet conceive.

Miracles are real. But they do not occur to set ourselves up to want a specific thing. Instead they remind us that the way things are is not the way they will always be.

It helps me to remember that Jesus prayed for a miracle on the night before he died. "For you all things are possible," he prayed to his abba. "Remove this cup from me." Only when he opened his eyes, the cup was still there. Did he lack faith? I don't think so. The miracle was that he drank the cup believing in the power of God more than he believed in his own. It is always a miracle, isn't it, when we understand that God is God, and we are not.

I do not expect nor recommend any of us stop praying for miracles. The world needs all the miracles it can get. But there is simply no formula for success -- which is a real relief for those of us who cannot seem to ring that county-fair bell. Maybe we cannot do it because it is not our job. Do not fear, only believe. That is our job. The rest is up to God.

Faith opens us up to the powerful presence of God in our lives, in our souls, in our bodies. Faith makes us whole. Faith as a vital part of us, not faith as a set of correct beliefs but faith as an attitude, more than that, faith as an orientation toward life. Faith is not giving correct answers to examination questions, faith is living and acting on the presence of God in our lives, in our history, in our community.

The healing miracles of Jesus and his followers are not supernatural. Neither are they what we think of as natural. Rather, they are holy. They are divine. There is a much bigger world out there than what we've limited ourselves to.

Yes, Maureen, miracles are real. That you have experienced one is a gift beyond understanding. I hope others of you will think hard about where a real miracle has happened in your life, and both claim it and share it. And if you can't identify one, or if you have experienced the specific lack of a miracle, then share that too. Miracles are glimpses of God's glory and promise. God's sign that all will be well--even if we can't see it yet.

May it be so. Amen.

\*With thanks and credit to Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon of the same name, for inspiration and direction.