

WHERE'S MY MIRACLE?
Sermon for Pentecost 4B: Mk 5:21-43
LPC, 5/28/09

What beautiful stories! Jesus is approached by a man named Jairus who pleads with him to heal his dying daughter, and Jesus agrees to follow Jairus to his home. On the way, a woman with a chronic hemorrhage touches Jesus' robe and is healed by the outflow of Jesus' power. After speaking with her, Jesus proceeds to Jairus' house where Jesus raises the daughter from the dead!

Unfortunately at this point in my career I find these healing stories as troubling as they are comforting. Why? Because of all the instances I know of where instantaneous healing does not occur.

Several years ago as a lay minister I counseled the mother in a very troubled family. Her teenaged daughter had run away from home, quit school, started taking drugs, stolen to finance her habit, and taken up with some rough friends. The mother prayed for her daughter to have peace. Then the daughter was killed in a car accident. The mother, of course, was distraught, and struggled with her faith. "I know God does miracles to save people," she cried, "Why couldn't he have done a miracle and saved my daughter?"

My own mother, as you know, has been on the prayer list. She has been in chronic pain for months from a pinched nerve in her back. Her doctors have been treating her for pain, because of the risks of doing surgery on someone her age, but the drugs either don't touch the pain or make my mother feel like a zombie. Where is the magic robe for *my* mother to touch and be healed?

If you accept that God effects miraculous cures, sooner or later you have to ask, "Why do some people get their healing miracles and not others? What do you have to do to get a miraculous healing?" The person who is really suffering asks, "That woman in the Bible got her miracle. Where's *my* miracle?"

The matter is not helped by the way modern ears hear Jesus' words, "Your faith has made you well." This leads people who do not receive the miraculous healings to assume that their faith must be defective. Then they have another reason to feel miserable. Not only are they chronically sick, or bereaved by the death of a loved one, but they have to live with the knowledge that their faith has been proven inadequate by the failure of God to intervene.

Miraculous healings are things that mainstream preachers approach with caution. I approach them with caution, too, and I even have personal experience with miraculous healing: the instantaneous healing of a great grief that happened as suddenly as if I myself had touched Jesus' robe. I can't explain, either to myself or to another, how or why this happened to me. It didn't seem to me like a matter of having faith. At the time I wasn't even thinking about God. I just know I lay down in abject grief and rose up

whole. I can't really say my faith made me well. Faith came afterwards, when I realized that it must have been God who healed me, because it couldn't have been anything else.

I can draw on this memory when my own faith flags. But I can't, even on the basis of personal experience, tell people how to be healed by God.

I don't think this passage about Jairus' daughter and the hemorrhaging woman is about how to be healed by God. This passage does tell us something about under what conditions God's healing mercy seems to work most effectively.

Both the woman with the hemorrhage and Jairus are at the end of their rope. They are desperate. They have no reserves left. They don't approach Jesus on the basis of their own deserving. They are utterly raw. There is no anger left, no wounded pride, no frustration, no recrimination, no self-justification. There is nothing left in them to get in the way of Jesus' mercy. There's very little left in them at all except the quintessential prayer, "help me." They throw themselves on Jesus' mercy.

And Jesus' mercy overflows. They are healed instantaneously.

This kind of thing still happens. The classic case is of the alcoholic hitting rock bottom and turning to his or her "higher power" in utter powerlessness, with nothing left to get in the way of God's mercy. Of course, in the case of the recovering alcoholic, the healing is not instantaneous. For a person in recovery, the healing is lifelong. But the healing is also real, and many consider such healings to be miraculous. It is a fact that until Bill W came up with the first twelve step program, with its requirement to accept powerlessness, there was *no* effective treatment for alcoholism.

I still don't have an ideal response to a person in pain or grief. Is it possible to tell such a person that the healing power of God's mercy is facilitated by a soul emptied of anger, pride, self-justification, recrimination, etc., and left raw before God? I have found nothing that works every time with every sufferer except loving them.

In loving them I find I have a broadened understanding of what constitutes healing, and of what constitutes the miraculous. It is, in its way, a miracle that someone like my mother remains sweet-spirited and outgoing even when in frequent pain. It's no less miraculous to me that parents who have lost children can go on living gracefully and graciously, their grief never forgotten but not crippling them either.

The faith that heals in these situations seems very close to hope and to love. Hope is the fiercely held belief that all will be well despite evidence to the contrary, while love is the soul turning outward to God, to others and to the world despite the temptation to dwell within one's own troubles.

Where's my miracle? It may be that with all the suffering in the world, people do have faith, and hope, and love. And God's will is to heal. And God's will be done.