

June 8, 2008
Matt. 9:9-13, 18-26
Rom. 4:13-25

MIRACLES HAPPEN. SOMETIMES.

When I was in high school, right about the time that half the students were trying their best to look and act like hippies, the other half were trying their best to be Jesus Freaks. I can remember some angry exchanges between the two groups. The Jesus Freaks were pretty un-Christian and the hippies were definitely un-Zen in their dealings with each other.

There was one guy who got a lot of attention because he carried a full size Bible with him everywhere he went and he would stand in the courtyard and exhort everyone who went by. Most people, even those who were on the religious side of the divide just sort of smiled indulgently whenever he started talking.

But a story circulated about him that I'm not sure looking back on it whether it was even true. They said that one time, in the locker room before a football game he stood up and informed the coaches and the entire team that he had seen Jesus himself sitting on our goal post the previous evening and Jesus told him that we were going to win that game.

I can tell you that this story did not win him any new converts. And I'm afraid I don't remember whether we won that football game or not. I do know that he grew up to be a man devoted to his church and to discipleship. Like a lot of us, he turned out all right even if we were a little out there in our youth.

It is strange that our Gospel stories today reminded me of this story about Jesus on the goal post. It took me a little while to figure it out, but it has to do with the relationship between faith and miracles.

The two miracle stories – one about the woman who is healed after 12 years of hemorrhaging and another about a young girl raised from the dead fall into a category called “faith miracles.” These are healing miracles where the Scripture emphasizes the faith of the person cured. Just a little earlier in chapter 9 of Matthew Jesus healed a paralyzed man because of the faith that he and his friends demonstrated.

But there are a lot of miracles that seem to have nothing to do with faith. In chapter 8, Jesus cures Peter’s mother-in-law and a whole crowd of people who come to him with no mention of their faith. Jesus cured a man who had been sick for 38 years even though the man clearly had no clue who Jesus was and he didn’t even ask to be cured.

Now, I want to take a short excursion off the specific topic at hand, which, in case you haven’t figured it out is faith and trust, to talk about miracles. Ever since the Enlightenment beginning around the early 1700s, scholars have been struggling with the miracle stories in the Gospels. Thomas Jefferson just couldn’t accept the idea of miracles and he re-wrote the Gospels leaving all of them out. Tolstoy did something similar about 100 years later, but he combined them into one.

Jefferson and Tolstoy had a legitimate point in that the greatness of Jesus Christ and his message is not dependent on whether he actually performed miracles. But there are two things they failed to account for. One, without the miracles, the Gospels are really boring. Believe me, I’ve read some of their efforts, but I couldn’t get through them because it was just too tedious.

More importantly, the miracles serve important purposes other than simply evidence of Jesus’ supernatural power. All the miracles carry

messages about God's saving grace in Jesus Christ, so we can't just write them off—or out.

The miracle stories are not included to test our faith. The question for Christians examining their faith is not “do you believe in miracles.” The question is do you trust in God?

Faith itself is a gift from God. Just like salvation, it is not something we earn by racking up points on some heavenly score board. Paul's letter to the Romans, in one of his typically obtuse tangents tries to explain that to us. When Paul talks about Abraham's faith and trust and God's promises fulfilled, Paul is trying to explain that message applies equally to us.

[Romans 4:18-20] ¹⁸ *Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be."* ¹⁹ *He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.* ²⁰ *No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, **but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,*** ²¹ *being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.* ²² *Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness."*

He grew strong in his faith. So, not only is faith a gift from God, it is a state of being that grows with use. Like getting into physical shape. You know how it is. You make your New Year's resolution to exercise 5 days a week and you start out riding your bike, or walking or jogging around the block, or you go to the gym and set the weight machines on the lightest level and still you think your going to die the first day, but by the end of the week your adding on and your feeling better. You get excited about it and you do

more and more, but if your routine gets disrupted or you just give up because it's hard you lose it in a hurry.

Growing in our faith is just like that. We can watch ourselves grow stronger just like Abraham and Sarah did. Jim Wallis said faith is about “trusting God in spite of all the evidence and then watching the evidence change.” Start out with that little gift of faith that opens your eyes, and start looking at what is happening in your life.

Look at the way Jesus called Matthew the tax collector. Matthew is sitting in his tax booth making a good living and even though he is despised by most everyone because he is after all the tax man, he has plenty of friends and a pretty good life in terms of material comforts. But Jesus says follow me and he does even though there is no question that Matthew is a sinner.

And Matthew isn't alone. Many sinners followed Jesus and when the religious leaders question his associations with those people, he answers first with an obvious proverb: “Those who are well have no need of a physician.” Then he tells the leaders to go think about what God meant when God said “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” because Jesus came to call not the righteous, but the sinners. Maybe Jesus is suggesting here that those religious leaders are not as righteous as they may think they are if they think there is something wrong with ministering to sinners.

Then Jesus turns his attention to two who are seriously afflicted physically, but whose faith saves them. It took an extraordinary act of courage for that woman to touch Jesus. She was considered unclean and touching him would have made him unclean. But her trust in his goodness and her faith in his power enabled her to do it. But Jesus doesn't just cure her physically, he says “take heart.” One way to translate it is “have

confidence.” He gave her more than physical recovery. He made her faith and trust even stronger.

And then we have the distraught father. Again, the miracle recovery – this time from death—is connected to faith, but it is the faith of the father, not the faith of the dead child. This time, Jesus doesn’t say “your faith has made you well.” But remember the father’s first words to Jesus: *“My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.”*

In each case, the characters are responding with trust to God’s gift of faith and their response increases their faith.

Here is what the message of these stories is NOT. The message is not “if you just have enough faith God will cure every illness, prevent every tragedy and you will live a life free of worry, anxiety and suffering.”

A couple of years ago, a family member of one of my closest friends was diagnosed with terminal cancer. I suspect there are few people in this room who have not had some experience with that terrible range of disease called cancer. This lady was a music director of a Presbyterian Church in Minnesota. She did everything the doctors suggested and the doctors tried everything they could think of, but in a matter of a few short months, she went from being healthy and active to being on her death-bed. When it became clear to her that she was going to die, she assured everyone that she was prepared and tried to convince them not to grieve. Her message was “death is not the worst thing that can happen to a Christian.”

Sadly, her husband of 40 years could not hear her message. At first he thought that if he prayed hard enough and long enough, that would do it. Then he somehow got connected with a self-appointed healing prophet who took his money and told him that if his faith and her faith were strong

enough she would not die. He convinced himself that whether God would work a miracle or not work a miracle depended on how powerful he, the husband, was. Instead of enjoying the remaining time he had with his wife, he made himself miserable. He was a very pitiful person to be around and he was very wrong.

But you know what, when she died, he was OK. Because he really did have faith and somehow, in the end, he could draw on that hope of the resurrection that is finally God's promise.

God's covenant with humanity is not about magical powers that are waiting to be tapped with the right formula of prayer and repentance, like spells and potions in fairy tales. The Covenant is this: God loves us in spite of our persistent failures and God redeemed us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in spite of our persistent failures. Because of God's grace and the gift of faith, we know that we are alive—now and forever.

Stories like today's Gospel lesson teach us what God desires from us in response to his unconditional love. God desires prayer as an expression of our gratitude. God desires acknowledgement of his sovereign power and authority. God also expects us to recognize that we all fall short and we have no right to claim superiority of position in our relationship with him and each other. I don't think that God ever favors one high school football team over another—at least not on the basis of the strength of their members' faith claims.

Sometimes, God intervenes and works a miracle even in this day and age. And sometimes, but by no means always, the beneficiary of those miracles is a person of abiding faith. But whether the desired miracle happens or not, the gift of faith produces the gift of hope and for those of us who receive it, that is what can get us through whatever this life dishes out.