I recently began serving one day a week as chaplain and spiritual director in an addiction recovery community here in New Hampshire. I am following the ministry of a dear friend and mentor, recently retired. One of the joys for me of being present in that setting is that I am asked to celebrate the Eucharist weekly and as part of that Communion liturgy, there is also a service of healing that takes place.

Generally there are anywhere between 20-30 people who choose to come to worship. We sit in a circle, entering into God’s presence through prayer and the Word. We pray for others, we confess our sins, and then the I, as the presider, offer the laying on of hands in healing prayer. As the blessing prayer moves from person to person, all the others in the room enter into that prayer for healing of body, mind and spirit of their companion. It is an incredibly moving experience in that place, as hands and hearts join to ask for God’s healing presence to reside in each person.

I believe that miracles happen in that place. I believe that miracles happen in this place. I believe that miracles happen in God’s world.

Today Mark presents for us two stories of healing. Both are pretty spectacular for very different reasons, and Mark chooses to wrap one inside the other. Jesus and his companions are now back in Jewish territory, after visiting “the other side” of the sea. Jesus continues to draw large crowds; he has truly become a rock star.

The first person we meet in the story is Jarius, a temple leader, and man of considerable stature in that community. His twelve-year-old daughter is ill and dying. Jarius is frantic as he does the unthinkable for a man of his position. He throws himself at the feet of this itinerant preacher-healer and passionately pleads for Jesus to come with him and lay his hands upon his daughter. I wonder, what must it have taken for Jarius to approach Jesus in this way? What other avenues must he have tried before he reached out to Jesus? (I think it’s something to think about, that even when we come to Jesus as our last resort, he still simply “goes with us”.)

And so, Jesus goes with Jarius, and as they move through the crowd, something perhaps even more strange takes place. For where a man of means comes pleading for healing for his daughter, an “unnamed woman”, desperate for wholeness, also comes, but to steal a moment, a touch, a brush with a wisp of clothing – hoping against hope for relief from a life of isolation and desolation.

It seems to me that for both of these figures, that desperation, more than faith drives their actions. At a time when many children died before the age of 10, and where sons are often valued more than daughters, Jarius risks being ridiculed, and in leaving his daughter’s side he also risks missing the last few moments of her life.

As for the “unnamed woman”, she has been ill, her life’s energy leaking from her for twelve years, indeed as long as Jarius’ daughter has been alive. Her condition renders her ritually unclean, kept apart from her family and community, in a perpetual Red Tent. She has expended all her resources seeking a cure and now she has nothing left, relegated to a permanent place as outsider. Where many people are likely coming to Jesus simply because they want to be near a celebrity, this woman is reaching out for her life.

When it comes down to it, what choice do these two people have but come to this Jesus, hoping and praying for a miracle?

So, as Jesus moves through the crowd on the mission of mercy to the girl, he feels power flowing from him, and stops to see who touched him. The disciples are incredulous at Jesus’ being waylaid by a simple touch*–“You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say ‘who touched me’?”* But Jesus, who felt God’s power flow through him to another, senses that amid the commotion of the crowd, there is one person who has a particular need, who requires restoration.

The woman comes forward, to meet Jesus face to face. She fears reprisal but instead she is called “daughter”; no longer on the fringes, now belonging to a family once again. “*Go in Peace, and be healed*.” Not just another temporary fix, but a brush up against grace, and the restoration of her body, mind and spirit.

As they leave the woman, word comes that the daughter has died. This is just about as awful as it can get. Just think about it, Jarius has done everything he can, gotten down on his knees and begged, and still help comes too late. But Jesus, ignoring the urging of those around him to let it go, to simply move on to the next person in need, turns to the father and gives to him the shortest sermon in the gospels, *“Do not fear, only believe.”*

They come to the house where the girl lies. There are people milling about, some wailing and others ready to dismiss this healer with derisive laughter. Jesus clears the area of the commotion and the nay-sayers and brings with him into the home the parents of the girl. He bids her rise in health and wholeness with his words and the grasp of his hand.

Looking at the encounters Jesus has with these three people, I am struck by the way in which touch is central to each one. Jarius begs for Jesus to lay his hands on his daughter, the woman simply wants to brush her fingers on his garment, and Jesus does not simply call out to the girl, but offers his hand to hers raising her from her bed.

This is no far away savior. Jesus is unconcerned with the purity constraints and consequences of physical contact with bleeding women and dead little girls. Jesus responds in the most intimate way to the vulnerability and desperation of these three different characters, restoring them to health, life and wholeness, connecting with them, body, mind and spirit. He calms their seas and gives them peace.

It is a hopeful thing to read these miracles of healing in the scriptures. Through them we witness the power of God to enter into those spaces where there seems to be no hope. But I wonder if sometimes miracle stories have the potential to cause the rest of us more pain than comfort. Barbara Brown Taylor writes this, “*The problem with miracles is that it is hard to witness them without wanting one of your own.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Most people don’t get big miracles like the ones we read about today. But, everyone knows somebody who could certainly use one. And I get so concerned when I hear well meaning people tell someone that if they only have enough faith, God will answer their prayers, ….as if nothing will happen if somehow we don’t have enough or pray hard enough….. and it is our fault if we don’t get the outcome we want so desperately. Brown-Taylor writes,

*“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.”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

When Jesus prayed on the night before he died, he asked for the cup to be taken from him. And when that did not happen, he drank of it anyway. That was the miracle. The miracle of his faith and trust in the God he knew as Father; *“believing in the power of God more than he believed in his own.”*

This is not to say we should stop praying for miracles, because I believe God hears us. I believe that every person that comes forward for prayer during this service comes with the hope and trust that God hears our prayers. To ask something of God is to edge deeper into relationship with God. I believe that each person that stands with another and receives a healing touch and a comforting word carries with them the prayers of the all people here in this place. And I have no doubt; Christ is in this place with us. I believe that each shawl that is knitted in prayer takes with it the prayers of this community of God as it goes out these doors.

We can testify that all of us will be in search of healing at some point. We are human beings. Our bodies will fail us, our hearts will ache, and our spirits will sit for a time in darkness. In those times we will pray for healing for ourselves and those we love. Healing comes in many forms – big and small. For some, healing can be manifest in peace and acceptance in the face of disappointment. For those with chronic pain, a few hours of comfort in the company of good friends and laughter brings blessed relief. For an addict, another day free from active disease is indeed a miracle.

The healing we may be blessed to receive in our physical bodies can be, for sure, the very gift of God, but still that healing is temporary. One thing we can count on is that the way things are today are not the way things always will be. May the healing we receive through our deepening relationship with Jesus give us wholeness, a wholeness that permeates our very being and lives in us and in our relationships with each other in this world and in the next.

Amen

1. Taylor, Barbara Brown. “The trouble with miracles”, from Bread of Angels. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Taylor. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)