

The 16TH Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: September 9, 2018

Proper 18: Mark 7: 24-37: *Are you ready for a miracle?*

Preached

By

The Rev. John E. Higginbotham

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

A priest friend told me about a miracle that happened to him. For many years, Fr. Craig suffered terribly with a bad back. It was so severe he had inter-vertebral injections to ease the pain. After a Saturday evening Mass, Fr. Craig walked home. It was winter and a bitter wind cut through him. Walking as fast as he could, he slipped on the ice and landed squarely on his back. When he got up off the icy sidewalk, he brushed himself off and continued walking home. It wasn't until he arrived home that he realized his back pain was gone. There was not even a twinge. That perfect fall caused a re-alignment of his spine. All of those pinched nerves were freed. For Fr. Craig that fall was truly a miracle. For Fr. Craig, God healed his back with that fall. Albert Einstein once said, "There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."

Now I would not dare to argue with Dr. Einstein, but there is a third alternative. Yes, everything in life is a miracle, but we need to leave room for those rare instances that occur every once in a while when something so extraordinary happens that there seems to be no other explanation than that God intervened in somebody's life in a wonderful way and something that wasn't supposed to happen did. So, do you believe in miracles? Are you ready for a miracle? We desperately want to, don't we?

Seven hundred years before the coming of Christ the prophet Isaiah was describing the age of the Messiah. He said that when the Christ came, "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy." (Isa. 35:5-6). Two of those prophecies are fulfilled in today's Gospel of Mark. The Evangelist tells us that Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him.

It's interesting. Jesus didn't heal this man in the way these people asked. Have you ever noticed that in your own life? God sometimes works in your life, but not exactly in the way you had specified? Jesus didn't put his hand on the

man. Rather he took him aside, away from the crowd and put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. Then he looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to the man, "Ephphatha!" (which means "Be opened!"). At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. People were overwhelmed with amazement at Jesus' ability. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute to speak."

People were amazed when they saw the things that Jesus did, particularly his acts of healing. He healed those who were in distress physically, spiritually and emotionally. Medicine was very primitive in 1st Century Palestine. That is one reason life was very short. If you had a serious disease, where would you turn? You and I simply do not realize how fortunate we are to have the benefits of modern medicine.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, the question for us is simple, does Jesus still perform such miracles today? Some very devout Christians say, "No." They say the day of miracles is past. We don't have to witness Jesus miraculous powers to believe He is the Son of God. We have our Bibles, which contain numerous eye-witness reports from people who were there when he healed the

blind, the deaf, the lame and the mute. We don't need miracles to know that Christ is who he says he is.

We do have the wonders of modern medicine. But, always remember, the physician treats, only God heals. I say that because God created the human body to heal itself. People are already living nearly twice as long on average than they did in biblical times. That doesn't mean we will not still be at the mercy of many different kinds and types of diseases, disorders or conditions. That doesn't mean that many of us will not destroy ourselves. Did you see the news report that the average life span of adults in this country actually shrunk in 2017 because of the opioid epidemic? The number of suicides continues to grow as well. And of course there are those lives are lost to gun violence. Just because many people are living longer than ever doesn't mean that we will no longer pray for God to intervene in our lives or the lives of those we love from time to time. But it does mean that we will not be as vulnerable to sickness and death; as people were when Jesus was teaching and healing. It does give us the opportunity to rethink the ways in which God answers prayer.

My brothers and sisters, there are two things we need to recognize about miracles of healing. First of all, we need to get rid of the idea that the more faith you have, the more likely it is that you will experience a miracle. A priest

friend of mine gave the best response I've heard to the question of faith and healing. I knew him as a wise, grandfatherly gentleman who had that calm reassuring voice that can melt away all fear. A blind woman was crying. She said, "Father, I was born blind, and I've been blind all my life. I don't mind being blind but I have some well meaning friends who tell me that if I had more faith I could be healed. This was evidently causing this woman great distress. Not only was she blind, but some of her so-called friends were telling her it was her fault. If she just had enough faith, God would heal her. The priest asked her something that I felt was quite humorous and yet also right on target. "Tell me," he asked this blind lady, "do you carry one of those white canes?" "Why, yes I do," she replied. The old priest said, "The next time someone says that hit to you, HIT them over the head with the cane; then say, 'If you had more faith that wouldn't hurt!'" You see my brothers and sisters we always get in trouble when we try to quantify our faith or another's faith with the word "enough."

What a wonderful statement. Healing is not proportional to our faith. Too many fine Christians have had guilt piled high on to their already suffering bodies because people have told them that if they had more faith they would be healed. It is an absolute lie! Some of the greatest Christians who ever lived have suffered terrible deaths. And, of course, everyone is going to die sooner

or later. Prayers are not answered according to the amount of faith we have. We also have to recognize that most prayers do not lead to physical healing. Some of us don't want to hear that, but it is true.

Most of us have known at least one person who been at death's door, and people have prayed and prayed for healing, but physical healing did not come.

Most of us are mature enough to realize that prayer isn't a heavenly slot machine into which we pour our prayers into and automatically the answer we desire comes out. If we could do that, there would be no need for faith.

Faith is belief in the unseen. But that doesn't mean that our prayers are unheard and unanswered. Prayers do make a difference. This should say to us, never give up on prayer. God uses all kinds of means to offer help to His people just as Jesus used different means to heal people. Sometimes it is the prayer of a priest. Sometimes it is just the presence of a loved one in times of crisis.

Late one night a dying Episcopal priest was admitted to the ICU of a hospital. The man was at death's door, and the doctor urged his wife to call in the family. The wife had a very special favor to ask of the hospital staff: could they arrange for her son, James, to visit his father? It wasn't as simple a request as you might think. James was a convicted murderer serving a life

sentence in the local prison. But the hospital staff pulled all the necessary strings to get James transported from the prison to the hospital. It was the least they could do for a man who was dying. No one in the hospital that night could forget the sight of a desperately ill father joyfully hugging his wayward son. The two men clung to one another for a long time, enjoying every second of their brief time together. That night, after James returned to the prison, his father seemed to regain his strength. Within a short time, the old priest was discharged from the hospital. The man who had been lying at death's door lived another year before passing away. Can anyone doubt that the sight of his son made a big difference in this dying man's recovery, however temporary?

So, here is our challenge for the week. The human body is very complicated. Healing may take place when emotions are stirred. Healing may take place when a deep emotional wound has been cleansed. A word of forgiveness has been known to heal a broken body. All kinds of things can make a difference in whether we are healed or not healed, including prayer. Jesus healed people in many ways, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually.

As most of you know my father is dying. Let me ask you, do you have someone who is experiencing a crisis in their life? Pray for them, but do it like a mature Christian, recognizing that God does not always work in the way we have specified. But God does work and every once in a while a miracle truly occurs.

AMEN.