

Miracles and Ministry

Preached by the Rev. Thomas M. Kryder-Reid on the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, 20 June 2010, at Trinity Episcopal Church, Indianapolis. Scripture readings: I Kings 19:1-15a, Psalms 42 and 43, Galatians 3:23-29, Luke 8:26-39.

I'll admit—as I try to make sense of miraculous healing stories like the one we just heard, I tend to rely on psychological explanations. Especially in a case like this demon-possessed character in today's gospel—he's so clearly crazed. His symptoms seem to cover every page of the industry-standard psychiatric diagnostic manual.

And yet, as any seasoned father on Father's Day knows, relying on psychology for mental health doesn't necessarily yield more favorable outcomes than expecting miracles. Besides, anyone nowadays can get just as carried away with psychological rationalizations as the ancients could with miraculous attributions.

Which reminds me of a cartoon I saw years ago: It shows a hiker—your basic back-to-nature, touchy-feely type. He's out in the woods. He's dangling from a tree branch by the collar of his flannel shirt. Two stout bears are eyeing him. "His name's Bradshaw," explains the one bear to the other. "He says he understands I came from a single parent den with inadequate role models. He senses that my dysfunctional behavior, hanging him up in the tree like that, is shame-based—it's codependent—and he urges me to let my inner cub heal. I say we eat him."

What do you say about the demon-possessed character in today's gospel—how Jesus heals him? Or about Elijah the prophet in the first reading—how God comforts and challenges him as he runs from the wrath of Queen Jezebel? Or about St. Paul in the second reading—how he's come to claim this faith he so cherishes, this liberation from feeling so "imprisoned," as he puts it, under the law of his Jewish heritage?

How does healing happen? How *can* healing happen—through us?

I

Recently I came across a newly published book [Gary B. Ferngren, *Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity*, Johns Hopkins 2009], along with a review of that same book [Alan Kreider, "Worthy of Care," *Christian Century*, 1/26/10, pp. 36-37], both of which have gotten me thinking about how healing can happen through us. I'm realizing we can learn a lot by looking back on how healing happened early on in the church, way back seventeen, eighteen, nineteen hundred years ago.

Let me give you just a quick outline of what this author and reviewer are saying. In many early church documents, much is made of miracle-working—lots of emphasis. And so there's a long-standing school of thought that regards the

rapid early growth of the church as attributable in part to Christians' fervor in praying for miracles, exorcising demons, and healing illnesses, just as Jesus so spectacularly demonstrates in today's gospel. The thinking is that if non-Christians perceived early Christians to be successful in bringing about these miraculous healings, they were moved to faith and became converts.

But there's another school of thought that's been gaining ground recently. This view, maintained by the author of the book, shifts the emphasis. The thinking is that early Christians drew people into the flock not so much because they worked spectacular miracles (although maybe they did now and again), but more because they effectively provided medical care. One important reason the church grew, this argument goes, is because our early ancestors adopted and applied the medical arts and sciences that Greek intellectuals like Hippocrates had started developing long before. So might it be that these early Christians were, in effect, precursors of the professionals we know today: the doctors, the nurses—and maybe also, ironically, the mental health practitioners I myself was just jesting?

What *is* clear is that early Christians have left us with inspiring examples to emulate. Miracle-working?—maybe yes, maybe no; you have to decide for yourself. But self-giving, including sacrificial self-giving?—the records of these instances are compelling.

One such record the book author cites is about how Christians responded when a terrible plague hit the area of Carthage in the year 252. Cyprian, the Bishop of Carthage, urged all the faithful under his charge to offer whatever care they could—medical, spiritual, everyday-practical. They were to offer it not only to fellow Christians, but also to pagans. And by all indications, the Christians did. They responded as a direct expression of their Christian faith: Their conviction that all human beings are created in the image of God, and so are precious and worthy of the best care. Their conviction that to be faithful followers of Jesus, we're to reach out to others, love others, put our lives on the line for others, even for our perceived opponents. "Compassion," the reviewer points out, "was a central value to the Christians." And he goes on to emphasize that "the Christians' anticipation of a life of eternal felicity lessened their fear of dying and equipped them to risk infection as they cared for the sick."

So I wonder: What were the miracles that these ancient followers of Jesus most often performed? Might the miraculous in their doings have had less to do with

spectacular demonstrations of divine power and more to do with steady, sustained self-giving for the well-being of others, even when at risk to themselves?

II

Here's my point: We can hear miracle stories from the Bible or any other source. And like that hiker in the tree, we can get ourselves all hung up trying to figure out and explain, psychologically or any other way. Or, we can invest ourselves in what God actually wants us to do—what we call ministry: the steady, sustained, sometimes thankless business of self-giving for the well-being of others, even when at risk to ourselves.

In a word: We can muddle ourselves over miracles. Or we can mobilize ourselves in ministry.

I say leave the miracles to God. Let the ministry be ours.

And notice, especially in the Bible, how this steady, sustained, sometimes thankless business of self-giving we call ministry inevitably factors into some of the more dramatic of the miraculous stories. Take today's stories, for example.

- That demon-possessed character: People must have gone out of their way to avoid this guy; the story tells us they were "afraid" even after Jesus healed him. But Jesus doesn't hesitate to be there with him and for him and deal with his demons directly, even if at the expense of the poor pigs.
- Elijah, too: Same point—God doesn't leave Elijah alone in his fear. God is there with baked cakes and a jar of fresh water—to nourish Elijah in that wilderness. God is also there in "a still small voice," the "sound of sheer silence"—to urge him out, send him home, challenge him to face down crazy, wicked Queen Jezebel and take down pathetic King Ahab.
- And St. Paul: It's not as though right after St. Paul saw the light on the Damascus road he was instantly converted, much less instantly accepted by the Christian community, the very people he'd been persecuting. Friends like Ananias and Barnabas stood beside him, stayed with him, and eased him into the world-changing role he'd eventually come to play [see Acts 9:10-31, Gal. 1:13-2:10].

Now realize, in the broader scope of the Bible, in the deeper context of our faith, stories like these fit into a framework—into the ultimate miracle God has already accomplished for everyone: the Easter miracle. Jesus' resurrection is God's once-and-for-always demonstration that even the worst powers of pain and death don't stand a chance against the life-giving power of God's love.

And so, like our early Christian ancestors, our part now is down-to-earth and more often than not, unspectacular. We invest ourselves in the steady, sustained, sometimes

thankless business called ministry, even when at risk to ourselves. And also like those early Christians, our anticipation of "eternal felicity" can lessen our fears, equip us to risk, and mobilize us to act.

Here at Trinity Church, you can find numerous opportunities to act. Healing ministers at the healing stations lay on hands and say simple prayers every Sunday during worship in response to healing requests or in celebration of thanksgivings expressed. Stephen ministers meet one-on-one with parishioners who want a caring Christian friend. Our various outreach ministries, especially through Trinity Outreach Center, offer lots of ways you can ease poverty and pain person by person. On any Sunday at the Center you can help serve a full-course hot meal to anyone who's hungry.

However any of us gets involved, what matters as we act is that we give of ourselves. Just as Jesus did for the tormented man, as God did for Elijah, as St. Paul's friends did for him, we give of ourselves. Then all bets are off. God only knows what miracles may happen.

I started out by taking a playful swipe at psychology. I'll wrap up now with a little poke at my own profession. Clergy are no more immune than anyone else from needing to be reminded that ministry is all about giving of ourselves. I once heard about a hospital chaplain whose bedside manner was so forced and fake that a bishop made mention of it in a sermon [the Rt. Rev'd John Rabb, Suffragan Bishop of Maryland, 5/12/98]. This chaplain was visiting a person coping with a long illness. Each time he stopped by, he'd stay only a short while. He'd reiterate the same platitudes about how much God loved her, how much God cared for her. But the emotional distance he kept was palpable.

Then one day, in a mere moment, the ministry worked the other way around. The patient looked at the chaplain and in all honesty said to him: "You know, please don't tell me about how much God loves me. I don't want to hear about how much God cares. Show me *you* love me, that *you* care, and then I'll know of God."

Sometimes a mere moment like that is all the miracle that needs to happen.

May God bless all our ministries.

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