

January 14, 2018  
Mark 1: 21-28, John 2: 1-12  
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*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight O God, our strength and our redeemer."*

Miracles are a central part of the Gospel stories. We heard only two of them today: The healing of a man with an "unclean spirit", and turning water into wine at a wedding. There are many others: a little girl being raised from the dead; fish and bread being multiplied to feed thousands; a bleeding woman healed after decades of suffering; the lame walk and the blind see.

If we choose to take these miracle stories literally – we cannot help but be left disappointed and even angry... Miracle stories can stir up hope and in turn, dash it in an instant – or we blame ourselves or others that we did not have enough "faith":

The image of a child being found in the recent California mudslide who did not survive...the refugees that leave their home in search of food...the loved one that dies of cancer...Why would God grant them relief then and not us, now?

I suspect many of us are rightfully skeptical of miracle stories or write them off as legends from a less educated time and place.

*However, when we simply dismiss them we miss a significant part of Jesus' ministry --- and we miss a significant message about hope and the power of imagination.*

Might these stories like others we have recently heard about older women and virgins bearing children; priests being silenced; angels singing in the heavens – awaken us to a reality beyond a *"reduced and disenchanting world where the impossible is always and forever impossible?"(McLaren)*

Theologian Brian McLaren writes in his book: We Make the Road by Walking – "in banishing what you regard as superstition, you may also banish meaning and hope. If you lock out miracles, you can easily lock yourself into a mechanistic system, a small box where God's existence doesn't seem to make much difference. (Pg. 97)

McLaren reminds us that there is a third option --- rather than taking them literally or writing them off, we can ask ourselves another question: *"What happens to us when we imagine miracles happening?"*

Miracles can serve as a reminder to think outside of the box...to use our imagination...to consider what could be...to expand into new possibilities.

When I hear myself say things like: “Well that’s just the way it is”...miracle stories remind me that, that may not necessarily be true...They challenge me to ask: “What am I missing here...what am I avoiding?...”

*Jesus was all about getting his people to dream big – to consider the “what could be”.*

In the miracle story we heard from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus heals a man with an “unclean spirit”. Scholars tell us that *“In the time of Jesus, clean and unclean/pure and impure - were central ways of distinguishing and separating individuals and groups; they outlined what foods could be eaten, and regulated hygiene and sanitation...”*

*Given our human propensity for justifying ourselves and for scape-goating others, the purity laws lent themselves to a spiritual stratification or hierarchy between the ritually “clean” who considered themselves to be close to God, and the “unclean” who were shunned as impure sinners who were far from God...ritual purity became a means of excluding people considered dirty, polluted, or contaminated.*

***In word and in deed Jesus ignored, disregarded and actively demolished these distinctions of ritual purity as a measure of spiritual status.”*** (*Journey with Jesus, From Ritual Holiness to Human Compassion, Essay 2009*)

Regardless of whether there was a literal healing or not– in a society divided by clean and unclean, the miracle was that Jesus did not ignore this man.

He saw him. He spoke to him. He showed mercy to him rather than shunning or disregarding him. This simple action, when multiplied, would have the potential of changing not only that one individual, but in turn the community and society around him.

When we allow this miracle story to hold some form of truth – it challenges the reduced and mechanistic way we divide, categorize and judge people so we can in turn, keep them at a distance. The miracle story challenges us to think outside of the norm – it expands our imagination and in turn could even have the power to change our behavior and our attitude.

This story reminds me of some of the current conversations regarding immigration in our country. The most recent statements harken back to an earlier time when our policies clearly favored Northern and Western European countries. While we did not use language of clean and unclean, there was clearly a stratification system of who was worthy and who was not. It was not until President Johnson that those prejudicial policies were really challenged and changed. (NPR, January 13, 2018)

These miracles stories can still awaken and challenge us to consider what is at the root of the ways we divide, categorize and judge people.

Last Sunday afternoon when I joined others at our Episcopal neighbors to celebrate the retirement of their Rector, Marilyn Cornwell, there were two people from TC5 who spoke. TC5 is the Tiny Cabin encampment that is at Interbay; both of these men spoke from the heart about how Marilyn saw them as beloved and worthy human beings. This is just as much a miracle story today as it was in Jesus' day. Pastor Marilyn's way of being in the world, when multiplied by the compassion of many others in Magnolia who live in this humane way, has the capability of not only changing the lives of those two men, it changes the whole Magnolia community.

*Now let's spend a bit of time on the second miracle story:*

The second miracle story from the Gospel of John is known as the first of the "signs" by which Jesus revealed his glory. For me it is a challenging story to take literally. I don't need Jesus to literally turn water into wine in order to convince me to trust what he teaches! In fact didn't he refuse to do just that kind of magic trick when he was tempted by "the devil" to turn stones into bread when he was hungry?

But we mustn't throw this story out either! It is a wonderful invitation to wonder – to think creatively – to use our imagination. This story can invite us to ask: In what ways are our lives, our religion; our society, *running out of refreshment*? What traditional "containers" need to be re-purposed?

In one of the on-line journals I receive there was an article about a dinner that was served at a cordoned-off street in Denver, Colorado where a dozen chefs worked intently to prepare a dinner for about 100 people. The plates were beautiful: lightly pickled cherry tomatoes, okra, radishes, and turnips; chips and salsa; tuna escabeche; pork barbecue hash and baked beans; fried chicken wings; lentil stew with goat meat; and flatbreads topped with all kinds of yummy things.

What made this feast unique was that every dish was made from garbage. Or more precisely, "food waste". All of the excess food was from hundreds of conferences and workshops that preceded the dinner. Though the food was edible, it would have gone to the garbage and then to the landfill...and eventually all of this waste would have turned into greenhouse gases...

There is a slow food movement growing across the world to raise awareness of and ultimately eliminate, food waste. We Americans throw away almost as much food as we eat because of a

cult of perfection, which in turn deepens hunger and poverty, and inflicts a heavy toll on the environment.

The anti-food waste movement is made up of people who are using their imagination and quite literally turning waste into food. I think Jesus would hold this up as a modern day miracle as a few people begin something that could ultimately have a global impact on hunger and pollution! (Christian Century, 2018)

Closer to home ---

I think about the varied ways this church building has been “repurposed” through the generations as we have evolved and changed – keeping it not just lovely but usable, accessible, and environmentally responsible.

Downstairs where we once filled the rooms with Sunday school children on Sunday mornings, was re-purposed over the years to welcome children and parents into a community Co-op during the week and is quiet on Sunday mornings. *This program is no less important or significant in purpose or in the ability to teach love and compassion.*

Our front yard area was re-landscaped to welcome people to come, sit, or have a picnic.

The Magnolia Art Experience, a nonprofit that has its office down the hall in another former Sunday school room and now oversees the Narthex Gallery...***New wine in old wine skins...***

*One of the things I most respect about our congregation is its’ willingness to be open to the new...*Through the years this congregation’s staff has changed and evolved to meet new and varying dreams and needs as we have sought to stay relevant in a changing world. Today at our congregational meeting we will discuss the possibility of a new Assistant Minister position. If accepted, this person would focus be on being church outside of the traditional Sunday morning model, and help us evolve intentionally and carefully into this next season of MUCC. *New wine in old wine skins...*

Jesus’ miracle stories hold truth for us. They are significant and powerful as they help us **step outside of what is and wonder what could be.**

The healing miracles challenge us to step outside of our assumptions and judgments about people; to come in close to one another with mercy and compassion. When we find ourselves stuck in “how things have always been...” the miracle stories proclaim that God is not done with us...God is never done transforming the world in order for God’s dream, God’s kin-dom, might be made real...We do not need to take them literally nor toss them out as foolish legends...Instead ---these wonderful stories can both challenge our assumptions and help us remain open to a sense of wonder and hope...