

“Persistent Miracles”
by Rev. Barbara Gadon
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First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, DE

The road leading from Jericho to Jerusalem was dangerous. It's a steep road – it must rise from 2,000 feet below sea level to 2,000 feet above sea level in 20 miles. It is a dangerous road, full of curves and attractive places for thieves to hide out to ambush the traveler. It's a road of pilgrimage; many people would take it to make their sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem. Jericho would be the last civilized place for 20 miles. The outskirts of Jericho would also be a great place for beggars to ply their trade. People on their way to perform a religious duty were known to be generous. In addition to Bartimaeus, there were probably many more – many lame or blind, too. It would have been his community, his way of life.

The healing of Bartimaeus is one of several healing stories in the gospels. We in our faith tradition often want to skip the miracle stories altogether. We may appreciate the timeless teachings about loving our neighbor and care for the poor, but the miracle stories are hard for us religious liberals to know what to do with. And so it feels a bit dangerous to explore them with you in worship. *Great.*

Thomas Jefferson, whom we Unitarians claim as ours with some reason, also wanted to pull us away from miracle stories. During the enlightenment, some biblical scholars started assuming that the miracle stories in the Bible were simply propaganda to make people believe in dogma. Or as Joseph Campbell would say, these stories were told so we could have our God “dubbed 'big boy of the universe.’” (We are not alone in this practice, you should know. There are also stories in Buddhism and Hinduism and Judaism of signs and wonders that were done so that people would accept the god of the home team as the true god.) Jefferson thought this was nonsense, and still loved much about the Bible. So he took a scissors to the gospels and in one logical *snip* got rid of all the miracle stories. We have a copy of the “Jefferson Bible” in our library; you can look at it. But it never become very popular. Strange. Celebrity author, presumably good press, and a lot of people still don't know about it. Most Bibles in existence have the miracles intact. Miracles, in this age of reason, have persisted.

When I was training for the ministry, like all seminarians, I completed a summer of CPE, or clinical pastoral education, at Rush Presbyterian St. Luke's Hospital in Chicago. One of their staff chaplains, Mary, was in a wheelchair. When she talked to our student group about faith and longterm disability, I immediately shot up my hand, not unlike Hermoine Granger. “What about those stories of Jesus miraculously healing people in the Bible?” I said. “Isn't that a little hard for them to take?” She smiled at me. Their CPE program was popular with Unitarian Universalist seminarians at Meadville. She was used to us. “Exactly,” she said. We would encounter people in the hospital, she told us, who might be just hearing that their condition was not going to get “better”. Some of our patients would have just heard some very difficult news. They are suddenly aware that they are traveling on a dangerous road. They hear that their sight will not return. That they will not walk again. The cancer is back. The tumor has grown. The baby's heart is too weak.

In the gospels, in the healing stories, Jesus would often say: “Your faith has made you well.” Those words can sound cruel to someone with a disability. They had plenty of faith – they believed just as much as the next person. And where was their miracle? What use are these stories? What use is the notion of miracles in the first place, in a world of science, natural law, and medical fact?

Yet, miracles persist. We hear quite often of people who feel they've experienced them. They

were told they could never expect to regain their speech, or sit up. They were told their child could never walk, and he's riding a bicycle and going to school. Alcoholics Anonymous and the other "anonymous" programs that help addicts have created miracles for thousands and thousands of people. It was founded on the notion that the addict was hopeless and required a "spiritual solution". A miracle. I've known many people who have experienced this – myself included.

We are starting to take the body-mind connection a lot more seriously in the Western world. Researchers are now measuring the impact of prayer on the brain. And even more mysterious, they are impacting the impact of the prayers of others on someone. Including times when the patient doesn't KNOW they are being prayed for. The National Institute of Health has actually found some evidence that it can make measurable difference to have people praying for you.

We're learning about other forms of spiritual treatment. Energy work, Reiki, and other forms. Marcia Seligson, a journalist, reports that she spilled boiling hot coffee on her legs and received third degree burns. She was told by a specialist she would need skin grafts and surgery. A psychologist friend asked if she'd be willing to be a "guinea pig" for a group of his friends who were doctors and psychologists experimenting with alternative healing techniques. She agreed. She laid on a table and they "waved their hands in the air" over her, she said, and in an hour and fifteen minutes, most of the pain and the burns were gone. Overnight, it left her completely. "I went back to the burn specialist and showed him my leg and told him what happened. It made him crazy." (Wakefield, *Expect a Miracle*).

And then we hear things that make *us* crazy. The mother of a dear friend of mine decided to treat her ovarian cancer with a macrobiotic diet. She had heard stories of the wonders it could do. For four months, she ignored the persistent symptoms with "faith" that this was going to be her miracle. When she finally returned to her doctor, the cancer had spread. My friend was angry at his mother for a long time. And heartbroken with grief. We hear of Christian Scientist parents refusing medical care for their children, believing solely in the power of prayer. And yet, for my friend's mother, and for Christian Scientists, there must have been some cases of miracles, or why would they have believed?

It can seem a dangerous thing, to believe in miracles. It can seem like a dangerous road. And deeply unfair. Why does a miraculous healing happen to one person and not another? We want miracles to be more predictable, or at least given out with some degree of fairness. They make spiritual leaders a little nervous. Dan Wakefield, the author of our modern reading this morning, interviewed a group of Episcopal priests on how they view miracles in modern life. Rev. Ed Bacon, from Jackson, Mississippi, said, "Our people have a hunger for understanding these things, and we tend to be careful about our responses. I think a lot of our practice is to protect ourselves from miracles." (Wakefield, *Expect a Miracle*)

That phrase really struck me – I think we do protect ourselves from miracles. From disappointment, or perhaps from something that we cannot explain or control.

I am protective in my own way, too. When I'm seeing someone who is critically ill with overwhelmingly poor chances of recovery, and they say, "I'm going to beat the odds, I'm going to be the one in a million that survives," I get nervous, I want to protect them. I want to gently dissuade them – won't the crush of disappointment be worse? And yet, I don't; how could I? If I did discourage them, I would be protecting myself more than I'm protecting them. I'd be protecting God in a way. Protecting my notion of a God who suffers with us, cares for us, gives us strength in our trials, but no, does not bend the laws of the universe upon our request. *That's it, mystery solved, universe explained, nothing to see here, people.* As if I know!

The Catholic church has no end of trouble with dealing with miracles. You know when people talk about sighting the Virgin Mary, and everybody gets real excited, and flocks to see her? Well, if the case gets big enough, the diocese will send an investigation team to verify whether or not it's really her. Maybe they are trying to keep people from being hurt. Ninety-nine percent of the time, they don't validate it. Nothing to see, go home. And people still come. I love the idea of all these renegade miracle-seekers who still come.

Lourdes, the most popular pilgrimage site in the world – before Mecca, before Rome, before Jerusalem, people go to Lourdes – millions each year. It has a long history of miracles and healing. In 1858, a young woman named Bernadette had a vision. She saw a beautiful woman in white who told her to dig a spring in her back yard, that it would have healing properties. People who visited it were mysteriously cured of their ailments. Well, it grew and grew in popularity, so in 1862, Rome decided to step in. They defined a cure, a bona fide miracle as something that was “contrary to all known biological laws and medical science.” Which I am sure included a lot in 1862. They set up a three-part system, with two medical tiers and one theological, to judge the authenticity of what people were claiming.

This system still operates today. A team of physicians still checks out each person claiming to be cured against the following – Is it serious enough? The person can't just go in with a cough and come out cured, for it to count as a miracle. Is there proof of the condition before the person entered the spring? Ex-rays, lab tests, written evaluations before and after. Is the change immediate and complete? Have they received any other medical treatment for it? If the person meets all these criteria, they are then passed to a canonical commission. I have no idea what their criteria are, but they must be quite strict. In 147 years, only 65 people have passed all these tests. Sixty-five. Last official miracle was in 1982.

Cases who were verified by the doctors but not by the priests are called “spontaneous remissions”. They number higher – roughly 3,500. Still, in 147 years, with millions visiting Lourdes every year, those are really lousy odds. And people come. More and more of them.

This is the part of the story I find most moving. Most people who go to Lourdes do not get the cure that they seek. They don't regain the use of their legs, they don't have tumors disappear. I don't want to discount the unexplained physical healing that DOES happen, and they do. But the witness I personally find most powerful is this: that regardless of what happens physically, people find a peace they didn't have before. They are changed inside, they want to serve others. Some pilgrims return to Lourdes year after year, helping other pilgrims bathe in the waters. They do intimate and sometimes difficult work, helping to the very ill to eat, go to the bathroom, dress, and get around. They do this for free, they use their vacation time to do it. It brings them joy. Their service helps bring about healing – completely unverifiable – for everyone.

The story of Bartimaeus could actually end with Bart throwing off his cloak, which would have been his only possession, and his means of gathering the coins he begged. It would have been throwing off his identity as a beggar. His heart must have been pounding when Jesus actually stopped and paid attention to him. But that expectation of a miracle – some miracle – would happen. That is important. His shouting over the din of discouragement. That's important. It is always terrifying to give up the identity of a beggar. And it's important that we do.

This is how I would describe a miracle – it's something that helps you throw off your beggar's cloak. It's an awareness you get of some fresh spring inside you, refreshing you, giving you new life,

even for a moment, when you expected to find none. It fills you with the sense that you have something to give other people.

The chaplain at the hospital in Chicago, Mary, was one of these. She shows her patients not the miracle of someone whom God made to rise and walk, but someone who could miraculously find a good life in a wheelchair, a life of service. A life of love. They saw her and found healing of the spirit. Her faith had made her well. It's tempting to say, "Well, she had a good attitude!" But I can tell you personally, a "good attitude" is not something I can conjure up in myself at will. A good attitude of the magnitude that it takes to transform yourself and others IS a miracle.

The same summer that I did my hospital chaplaincy, I befriended a man in my class at seminary, Jeffery Tidwell. When Jeffery introduced himself to us, he told us right off the bat, "I am HIV Positive – and I am positively in love with life." When Jeffery started talking with me about "miracles" I got nervous. I nodded in agreement. He could always tell I was lying. And he believed, sometimes in spite of me. That Jeffery Tidwell was a *scandal*, let me tell you. Tall, slim, and handsome, he told me stories that made me blush. He was careful, mind you – he wasn't out adding to the world's misery of AIDS. But he didn't have to turn off eros, passion, or his own gorgeousness and the attention he attracted. And he visited the homebound, sang in a gospel choir, taught Sunday School, and led writing campaigns to Congress. He led a juicy life, in all senses of the word, a life of full of service and passion. And he had AIDS.

My friend Jeffery did die the following year. But not before several miracles happened. We all took shifts staying with him in his apartment when his mother couldn't take care of him. Each of us reported the same thing – He would minister to US. On my shift, sometimes I'd go in worried, or feeling like the brave Red Cross nurse going out onto the field after a battle. I'd come into his apartment, and he'd say, "Hi Barbara. Want some barbecue chips? Want to watch Oprah?" It was a joy to be with him. A miracle. For me.

I am seeing the same spirit in people in this congregation. Two months ago, I wrote a little column in our newsletter, asking for "Life Experience". I asked people to tell me if they had experienced something in their lives they would be willing to share with another person. Something that might be frightening to experience on your own, like the death of a loved one, a chronic illness, the imprisonment of a family member. And I have been amazed at the spring it hit. People are still emailing me, offering themselves, thrilled that they might be able to help someone else through their hard-won wisdom. They had testimony to give. Their faith – in life, in spirit, in healing - had made them well.

Of course, miracles are not simply about the body and spirit of the individual healing. They are about society healing, too. And they are not divorced from the world of power and politics. A discouraging and dangerous road, too.

The road from Jericho to Jerusalem is a dangerous place. Add to all this, some troubling news. Just before our story takes place, Jesus has just told his disciples about the betrayal, arrest, humiliation, and violent death that he expects to happen to him. In Jerusalem. Where they are still going. You can see how everybody would be just a little edgy at this point. Last chance to turn around, I'm thinking.

And then Blind Bart shouts above the din. He must have had to be loud to be heard. Jesus of Nazareth! He says. Son of David... Uh-oh. "Son of David" is a nationalistic title, a highly charged political statement. To say, "Son of David" is to claim that he wants Jesus is to be the king, not Herod,

and it's a big slap at Rome. It was a dangerous thing to say. Seen this way, the disciples don't seem quite so mean. They're really trying to hold it together. A little order, a little control. Like the Catholic Church. Like Thomas Jefferson. Like me.

Maybe Jesus won't hear, the disciples think. Maybe he'll just keep going. They round on the poor man and hush him up as best they can. But of course, he hears. He stops and listens. He was not afraid.

There are today people who shout for attention, who shout their need when no one else wants them to hear.

A few years ago, we hosted one of my favorite events at our church. We had the great fortune of former Governor Russ Peterson introducing the film, "1968: The Siege of Wilmington". Russ was in great form – so sharp, so funny, so clearly ahead of his time as he told stories about fighting racism in our town in the 1950s and '60s. My job that evening was to stand next to the governor and repeat or paraphrase the questions from his audience. His hearing at a distance was rather poor. Everyone was having a wonderful time hearing stories, giving tributes, and thanking the governor for his life of service, for inspiring them. Then a woman stood up and said, "Don't you think there are blacks that just won't learn and want to make the problem worse? With their drugs and their crime..." Her lips were tight, her body trembled. I cringed, the whole room cringed. I must admit, I didn't know quite how to paraphrase this question, and I didn't honestly want to. Like a good disciple, I wanted to hush her and her embarrassing question.

But the miracle, if you want to call it that, started to occur when Russ answered her without my help. He'd heard her perfectly. He said something like this: "We can't give up seeing how all of us are together in this. It's going to take a long time. But it's going to take everybody." I watched her relax – suddenly - her face changed. I think she looked healed. I'm sure she was not looking to be healed, but sometimes we don't know we are looking. And it happens anyway.

Governor Peterson would be mildly horrified, I'm sure, to be compared with Jesus. But it just took someone who was willing to stop and actually hear without being afraid. He had just finished telling us about the miracles in his own life, the radical changes he had to make in his career, and the transformation that had occurred to him. He knew personally what one priest called "that zing! that comes in and makes someone come alive and do something [radically different] out of the blue." (*Expect a Miracle*, by Dan Wakefield)

Being open to such things is a dangerous – and wonderful - thing in life. It is infectious. Let us encourage one another to be open to them. And let us give thanks for the miracles that exist in our lives, already and always. Amen.