

Homily – Making Miracles

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This has been quite a week. You might think that I am talking about the start of our new adult ed series, The Art of Winter. Or, you might think I am talking about the rain, or the fall in the stock market, but I am actually talking about the Powerball lottery jackpot that grew to \$1.6 billion. I can't be the only one here today who bought a ticket and spent a little bit of time daydreaming about all that money. Now, I know enough from reading the newspaper that I didn't win the big prize, but I haven't yet compared my ticket to the winning numbers. I had work to do, and a sermon to write, so I saved my ticket and I will look at it after I get back from a Martin Luther King, Jr. celebration in SLO this afternoon. So, the potential miracle will live on a little longer. I wonder if I won anything.

Today's reading from the Gospel of John is considered the first miracle of Jesus from a chronological standpoint. Most scholars believe that the Gospel of John was written several decades after the other three gospels, but when we line-up the gospels into a chronology of the life of Jesus, most scholars will say that this is the first of the many miracles of Jesus.

Now, as far as miracles go, this miracle doesn't seem to be as dramatic as the calming of a storm, or the healing of the sick. It almost seems to be like a warm up miracle, as if Jesus is starting with something small before moving on to the big stuff. Changing water into wine, even a lot of wine, doesn't seem to get the same amount of respect as raising someone from the dead.

Before I continue let me make sure we are all on the same page with a definition of "miracle". Here is part of the the definition of "miracle" from Wikipedia. "A miracle is an event not explicable by natural or scientific laws. Such an event may be attributed to a supernatural being, magic, a miracle worker, a saint or a religious leader."

So, supernatural is a key component to the definition of miracle, but there is more to the definition. "Informally, the word "miracle" is often used to characterize any beneficial event that is statistically unlikely but not contrary to the laws of nature, such as surviving a natural disaster, or simply a "wonderful" occurrence, regardless of likelihood, such as a birth. Other such miracles might be: survival of an illness diagnosed as terminal, escaping a life-threatening situation or 'beating the odds'. Some coincidences may also be seen as miracles."

So there are two concepts to add to the supernatural concept, and they are beating the odds, and any wondrous occurrence.

“The gospels record three sorts of miracles performed by Jesus: exorcisms, cures, and nature wonders. In the Gospel of John, the miracles are referred to as "signs" and the emphasis is on God demonstrating his underlying normal activity in remarkable ways. In the New Testament, the greatest miracle is the resurrection of Jesus.”

Now, as twenty-first century beings we often argue about the miracles of Jesus.

Did they happen as described in the Gospels?

Are they supernatural?

Do they prove anything about the nature of Jesus?

I have my own beliefs about the answers to these questions, but I want to set these questions aside, because I don't think there is anything that I can say that would add to the answers that you already have.

Instead of rehashing the validity of the miracles of Jesus, I want to instead look at how the miracles of Jesus awaken something in us today. As we sit here today, we all have a deep knowledge that all is not yet right in our world. It may be that things are not right on a personal level, or it may be that we see things that are not right around the globe. Maybe it is even things that are not yet right in the functioning of our society. We all have a deeply held belief that some things are really good, but other things are not.

The point that I am making is that the miracles of Jesus allow us to imagine that the wrongs of the world can still be made right. It may not seem possible, it may not be logical, but miracles are still happening around us today, and we can be the hands and feet of Christ in the world to make sure more and more miracles are happening.

One way to help make miracles happen is to have a whole lot of money or power. I think that is what fascinated me about the Powerball lottery this past week. At \$1.6 billion the numbers were so large that there is no way that you could spend it all on yourself or your loved ones. This past week I started daydreaming about what I would do with a billion dollars that would make miracles happen.

Many of us have heard of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This is a fund of more than \$44 billion, and the primary aims of the foundation are, globally, to enhance healthcare and reduce extreme poverty, and in America, to expand educational opportunities and access to information technology.

So, I started daydreaming about what I could do with a billion dollars, and in our Tuesday morning Bible Study I posed this same scenario. One person would spend the money on providing education opportunities to the poor. This would help end the cycle of poverty and lower crime rates.

Another person would spend the money on mental health systems and policies. The goal would be to help the states get back into providing a functional mental health infrastructure.

Another person wanted to spend the money on cancer prevention and even cures. This would seem to go hand and hand with what Vice President Joe Biden is calling the “cancer moon shot” – eliminating the organizational and systemic barriers to cancer cures and prevention.

And, this points out an interesting aspect about miracles. One hundred years from now when cancer has been cured, it will no longer be looked at as a miracle. It will be common place and everyday. That is a miracle in and of itself. It will be a miracle when cancer cures are common place.

God make this happen soon please.

I think that all of these miracles suggested by those in our Tuesday morning Bible Study are wonderful, but if I had a billion dollars to spend on a miracle, I think I would spend it on eliminating the death penalty in the United States.

One hundred and fifty-nine countries have eliminated the death penalty, while thirty-six countries still actively practice capital punishment. The United States is the only western country that still practices the death penalty, though eighteen states have abolished it.

Yesterday, The Tribune had an article that said California voters are split over the death penalty. The poll showed that forty-seven percent of Californians want to eliminate the death penalty in California, and forty-eight percent want to reform, streamline and speed up the process that has bogged down the execution of those sentenced to die. If I had a billion dollars to spend on a miracle I would start with California and go state by state to eliminate the death penalty.

My rationale is based on my own spiritual beliefs about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. My conviction is also based on: (1) the overwhelmingly high financial cost of the death penalty, (2) the data showing the ineffectiveness of the death penalty in preventing violence, and (3) the disproportionate use of the death penalty against men of color. I also fret that we are executing innocent people. And the icing on the

cake for me is that I believe that the death penalty is a primary foundational element of our society that promotes, glamorizes, and legitimizes violence. I believe that the elimination of the death penalty will dismantle some of the violent framework of our society and will lead to less violence. And, as Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Capital punishment is against the best judgment of modern criminology and, above all, is against the highest expression of love in the nature of God."

Now, some of you may be glad that I don't have a billion dollars to spend on this miracle, either because you believe the money should be spent elsewhere or because you are part of the forty-eight percent that supports capital punishment. I want to acknowledge that some of you here today are not in the same place that I am about the death penalty.

I also want to acknowledge that we would be stunted in our spiritual journey if we waited for a billion dollars before acting on those things that we think would be modern day miracles. We should also not wait to have a million dollars to spend or even one hundred thousand dollars. We should not wait for money before we help make miracles happen.

Furthermore, we should not even spend a thousand dollars in making a miracle if we are doing it to exercise power and control. Spending money on power and control is detrimental to our spiritual journey. It is one of those insidious ways that money gets in the way of healthy relationships. Instead, we should make sure that our motivation to spend money on making a miracle is so that we can be the hands and feet of Christ in the world and bring forth the kingdom of God on this planet.

The kingdom of God is possible on this earth by big miracles and small miracles. It would be a miracle to have world-class education for all. It would be a miracle to provide substantive mental health support to anyone who needs it. It would be a miracle to cure and prevent cancer. And, it would be a miracle to end the death penalty and diminish our culture of violence.

It is also a miracle when an orphaned baby is held by a loving person. It is a miracle when a formerly incarcerated person leaves behind the cycle of wrongdoing. It is a miracle when a homeless person gets shelter, food, clothing and even a shower.

One of the wonderful things about my role is that I see that many of you are already making miracles. You are following the example of Jesus to make things happen, and the rest of us can do the same. The miracles of Jesus help us see that we can make miracles too. They help us get past the barriers that we put in place that make us think we can't make a difference. Follow the light of Christ into your own miracle making.