

Power to Heal and Bring to Life – A Miracle?

1 Kings 17:17-24, Luke 7:11-17

Susan Flanders – June 10, 2007

When our Wednesday morning Bible study group read the passage about Elijah reviving the widow's dead son, one of the members just shook his head and grumbled, "I think this is a terrible story!" A lively debate ensued, especially when we read the gospel passage which is also about bringing the dead son of a widow back to life – this time by Jesus. Even though the stories seem to be used to prove the bona fides of Elijah and Jesus as agents of God's power, they can be troubling. They can imply a puppeteer God, causing death to prove his power, or a fickle God – responding to some prayers with miracles, but not to most prayers. We could say Elijah and Jesus were special (and they were), but then, so what if they could bring those young men to life back then? That doesn't offer us much hope today. We can believe in Jesus, but we generally don't expect miraculous resuscitations like these to be products of our faith! We don't expect such things today.

Or do we? These ancient tales puzzle us because we don't think that way now. We don't expect holy persons to heal sickness and restore life at the point of death – but we do expect these things to happen. And they do – all the time – because of modern medicine. We have the benefit of centuries of research and discovery, and what is possible now would probably seem totally miraculous to ancient people. And even for us, we might acknowledge a certain divine inspiration at work in medical science, continually bringing to life new understandings and therapies which indeed allow us to cure and moderate all manner of formerly lethal diseases. Rather than occasional random acts by religious leaders, we have seen the rise of medical science, and although we do not attribute its successes to miracles, we might see the very existence of the health care we now have available, its very development as in part miraculous. Medicine is science, so perhaps to call it miracle is an oxymoron, but medicine is also art and vocation, and as such it needs inspiration – or, to use theological language, we might see the Holy Spirit at work in the amazing development of modern healing techniques. We might also see the Holy Spirit at work in the ways we are guided to attend to our own health care.

Harrison's recovery has depended on totally modern medical techniques; without them he might not have survived his heart problems. He didn't have Elijah breathing on him, but God's power, working through human beings has brought healing and recovery. And, something in Harrison prompted him to go to the hospital on Palm Sunday, again, not Elijah, but surely, God's grace.

For me too – therapy for cancer, especially the ability to detect early tumors, has made amazing progress, and treatment options are far more effective and sophisticated. I’ve been dealing with something that could have been lethal before modern medicine. Now, I can look forward to many years of good health. And, despite a very busy life, I had a mammogram when it was due – something in me reaching for health, responding to the preventive system available to me. I see some grace in that too.

So, before we dispense with these old stories of revival from the dead, we might instead reflect on the healing, life-restoring power of God at work today, here in our world. Isn’t medicine today, just as healing rituals of old, a channel for God’s healing power? We don’t tend to think of what we understand as miraculous. We see medical science as based on reason and experiment and research, but surely curiosity, intuition and fortuitous discovery all have their place – there is room here still for mystery and even miracle.

But who benefits? We cannot let rest our consideration of how we might understand God to be at work in healing today without facing the huge iniquities in health care – here in this country and around the world. Jesus obviously cared about healing and did not reserve it for the rich or for his own kinfolk and followers. Samaritans, and lepers and outcasts, the poor widow’s son – all were healed by him. Jesus knew that this widow would have no economic support if her son died; she would be alone and destitute. He had compassion; he literally felt with her the tragic consequences of losing her only son.

Today we know our health care system is enmeshed with economic problems, and we know political considerations drive a lot of what the government does or doesn’t do about it. Way too many people have no health insurance; way too many can barely afford coverage. Compared with universal health care in most other 1st world countries, our system is a disgrace. And in the 3rd world, diseases such as malaria and TB, which can be treated and cured as well as prevented, still take a shocking toll in lives, not to mention the continuing ravages of AIDS in huge proportions of the populations in sub-Saharan Africa.

Is the miracle which is modern medicine only for a few? Only for those of us with excellent health insurance – in my case, paid for in large part by you? Where is the compassion and the will that we need to come up with a system that provides the benefits of modern health care to all?

I recently talked to a good friend – a woman in her 70’s who is a sculptor. She has just returned from 2 1/2 weeks in Peru where she assisted a team of doctors who traveled there to perform surgery on children with cleft palates. Her role was to engage the children in arts and crafts, playing and storytelling

while they were waiting – to interact with their families – to be a sort of artist in residence in these temporary communities of patients. I'm not sure it was compassion that moved her to go there, perhaps curiosity, or a restlessness to use her art in a new way, but she came back changed. She is so in awe of the people she met, their warmth towards her despite their poverty, their hope, the amazing transformation in their lives by these operations. My friend wants to go back, and this time it is compassion. She is truly inspired to do something to help. This is a single example, but a good one, of how someone, instead of talking about making a difference, made one!

I do not begin to understand enough about the complexities of health care delivery to offer suggestions, and the gospel does not advise us, or even our political candidates either, on specific health care issues. What the gospel does tell us is that healing is important, that life, new life in the place of death is important, that these were things Jesus cared about and did, that God did, working in Jesus. Today we have amazing power to heal and to save people from death, and each of us has within us the urge to health and life. I think, along with our openness to this power and our prayers for healing we must confront – as individuals and as a society – our failure to see that all people share in access to health care. Our failure as the world's only so-called super power to provide for the basic medical needs of everyone is a sin. We're not too poor, and we like to think we have compassion and the will to accomplish our goals. What small things can each of us do; what larger things might we advocate; for whom might we vote. Everyone says we need to do this; who will actually do it?

I was moved by Bp. Chane's sermon yesterday at the ordination of Emily and 8 others as deacons. He was so clear, so forceful about the imperative to serve the poor, the needy, the sick and the lonely. From the earliest days of the church, deacons, the first ordained people, were set apart to carry out this ministry. Bp. Chane was so clear, so forceful, that charity alone, doing good works to help folks in need, is not enough. We need to address the structures in our society and demand change and not accept posturing and slogans. We need to support the hard work of figuring out how to provide the miracle of modern medicine to all God's children; and we need to be willing to pay for it. This, today, is how the old stories of healing in the Bible become relevant.

I believe that God's power, working in us, can still do miracles, but only if we believe they are possible, and only if we are willing to be part of making them happen. Amen.