

## **What's the Point?**

By Rev. Eric Moeller, St Lucas UCC, June 30-July 1, 2018

A couple of years ago a colleague of mine shared a story with me. She had a parishioner that had dementia. When my friend went to take her communion one day, she found the woman in distress. Her eyes were filmed over and very glassy. They looked like they had a lot of liquid in them, and she said her eyes burned and that her vision was very blurry. She was scared because she couldn't really see, but she was excited to take communion. Maybe she knew it was what she needed. When they got to the part where they shared the grape juice, she closed her eyes very tight and took a good two whole minutes to sip every drop out of the tiny glass. When she opened her eyes again, she was almost crying as she told her pastor how her eyes had cleared and she could see again. My friend could tell the difference in how they looked. A powerful moment. A healing through coming into contact with elements representative of Christ. Here is another story, written by Marjorie Kemper called God's Goodness.<sup>1</sup>

The story is about a young woman named Ling. Ling is a person of deep Christian faith who sees God's goodness all around her, even in the midst of poverty and unemployment. She continually takes in the beauty of God's world around her, thanking God always for the beauty God created in every moment and every place. She does finally find work as a home health care worker for a 16-year-old boy with cancer. As they spend time together she continually tries to help the boy, Michael, see God's goodness in the beauty of each day and his mother's beautiful garden. She prays for him always, praying for a miracle. They share their lives together, and form a tight bond. At one point she begins reading the Book of Job to him, and he finds something helpful in that story. He begins reading it himself, and memorizing great swaths of it, making the story a part of himself. It brings him understanding, perhaps, that there is a lot of mystery when it comes to God and the workings of this dynamic creation we participate in. Well, as time passes, Ling never gets the miracle she prayed for; that he would be healed. But here is their last conversation:

Mike looked up into her eyes. "You know where we made our mistake, don't you?"

Ling shook her head.

"Praying for grace instead of luck. We tipped our hand. We indicated we were willing to *settle*."

Ling bit her lower lip and didn't answer.

"Come on, Ling. 'How does that make you feel?'"

Ling giggled weakly. "Don't," she said. "Too tired to joke."

It was three in the morning. The only noise in the house was the refrigerator humming in the kitchen. Mike closed his eyes and quoted: "God thundereth marvelously with his voice; great things doeth he, which we cannot comprehend."

"That not God, that the refrigerator."

"Maybe, maybe not. You'll admit that the universe, or God—whatever you like to call it—*does* stuff we don't get. Hegel didn't get it. I'm not even sure Einstein got it."

"He get it. That's why he stick tongue out."

Mike snorted.

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<sup>1</sup> Marjorie Kemper, "God's Goodness," in *Faith: Stories*, ed. C. Michael Curtis (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003)

Ling took a long breath. She put the cap back on the bottle of Auntie's lotion and said, "Maybe God blessing us this moment, and we not knowing it."

"Thanks for trying, Ling, but that may be the single most depressing thing you've said to me."

"Not depressing, Mikey. I only mean he bless me with you and he bless you with me."

Rather than Mike's miraculous healing, the miracle they received is one another. It seems that while we are looking for some direct intervention by God, we ourselves are the intervention participating in the miracle of relational love that transcends everything. This story is probably closer to most of our experiences than the healing of my friend's parishioner or the healings from the Gospel of Mark. We faithful people pray for healing for others and ourselves, turning to our God, sometimes in desperation, asking for miracles that do not happen in accordance with our wishes. This being the case, what are we to make of this Gospel story that seems to say your faith will make you well? Let's take a look.

The story in the Gospel of Mark contains two miraculous healings, and, notably, a lot of risk taking. The first person to take a risk is Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, whose very name means One who is enlightened. He comes to Jesus, falls at his feet, and begs him repeatedly to come, lay his hands on his daughter, and make her well so she will live. This is risky because Jewish leadership are already known to not be fans of Jesus, and are already trying to figure out how to be rid of him. Yet here is one of their own, one enlightened, falling on his knees and asking for help from one he has come to believe is from God. In doing this, Jairus is risking his reputation, power, and livelihood. It is a profound sign of trust and faith in Jesus, and Jesus' response is to go with him. Their journey is interrupted by another risk taker, though.

A woman who has had a blood flow for 12 years seeks her healing as well, though anonymously, initially. This woman has spent everything she had trying to be healed by doctors, but has only gotten worse. So she is now also in poverty, and her condition would have made her ritually unclean, so she lives as an outcast from the community, and to touch her would make one unclean as well. She is the very opposite of Jairus. This woman of the margins then takes a risk by stepping into the crowd simply to try to touch Jesus' cloak so she would be healed and restored physically as well as socially. She manages to touch his cloak and is healed. Jesus, though, knows his power has left him. Why it responded to her touch, but not the others who likely had touched him as well is part of the mystery. Nonetheless it had, and she was now healed, and he had now been touched by an unclean person according to the law. So they pause the journey to Jairus' home so he can find the person who drew power from him. He doesn't have to look hard, though, because the woman, taking another risk, falls at his feet in fear and trembling and tells him her story. Now, Jesus could have responded harshly, but instead, he calls this outcast woman 'daughter,' says her faith has made her well, and sends her home in peace having been healed. The two of them stood in that moment in a new relationship, and that relationship seems to have been important to Jesus or he could've simply kept walking.<sup>2</sup> Both Jairus and

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<sup>2</sup> David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16) (Feasting on the Word: Year B volume) (Kindle Location 6741). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

this woman have found new relationships with Jesus, where they have recognized his divinity and taken the risk to entrust themselves to him. And now that this daughter has been healed, it is time for their journey to Jairus' home to heal his daughter.

While Jesus is speaking with the woman, Jairus receives news that his daughter is dead. Jesus tells him, "Do not fear, but believe." So they continue on, Jesus removes everyone from the room, but the parents and a few disciples. He then touches her hand. This, again, is a no-no. It is breaking the law. He is touching a dead body. But it does not stop him from intervening. He takes her hand, and says, 'little girl, get up!' And she does! This 12 year old girl has been resurrected from the dead! And Jesus then insists she be fed, indicating she really is fully alive with normal needs. Those present were filled with amazement, amazement they are told to keep to themselves and tell no one what had happened. Maybe this detail is there to shift our focus away from the healings themselves. Maybe they aren't in and of themselves the point. The healings do testify to Jesus' identity. These stories, as one commentator puts it, reveal Jesus is the Lord of life and law.<sup>3</sup> He breaks the rules in the interest of bringing wholeness and restoration, showing that nothing will stop the sharing of God's life-giving love for all people. After all, those who receive healing in this story are from opposite ends of the social spectrum. But if the healings became the focus, then the purpose of faith would be purely what we could get out of it. Perhaps the focus should be on relationship. The faith of Christ revealed in his life was that of seeking to bring us into right relationship with God, and right relationship with one another. Righteousness in other words. And these right relationships create the wholeness of the Kingdom. Did you notice the repetition of the number 12 in the story? It's a significant number that represents wholeness. When Jairus and the woman fell before Jesus, they were initiating a relationship with him, acknowledging and submitting to his Lordship. They took risks in doing so, and Jesus in turn took risks to be in relationship with them, but both had their fears alleviated in the initiation of that relationship, and turning to Jesus. Our faith, too, is about a relationship. It is about living in right relationship with God, one another, and our neighbors. Prayer, this turning to Jesus, or God, maybe asking for miracles, is a part of that relationship. When we stay grounded in that relationship, like Ling from the Kemper story constantly giving thanks or asking for miracles, though the outcome may not change, we are transformed and able to remain grounded in the goodness of God, even in trying circumstances. We can make our requests, ask our questions, or name our fears and angers to God, and God can respond and grant us the love, strength, courage, and peace we need to move forward. When we pray together, we share our lives with each other and God, grow closer in compassion and empathy, and perhaps are able to offer one another the love, strength, courage, and peace we need to move forward together, again like the experience of the Kemper story and the relationship that formed between Ling and Mike. And, who knows, maybe we experience a genuine miracle every now and again for whatever mysterious reason. But when we take the risk of putting our lives under the Lordship of Christ and walk in his way of faith that stops at nothing to share God's love with all people to bring wholeness, we do so knowing there is nothing to fear, for the Lord of Life guides and sustains us. Such faith, somehow, some way, truly does make us well.

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<sup>3</sup> David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16) (Feasting on the Word: Year B volume) (Kindle Locations 6763-6764). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.