

Difficult & Miraculous
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
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There was a time when my hang-up was the miracles. The hard part was the walking on water and the multiplying loaves and fishes. The really hard part was the resurrection. I can't tell you exactly how I got over these issues; it wasn't like one day I just woke up believing. It wasn't that I heard a really good sermon that solved the conundrum once and for all. It was more a slow realization of the kind of world that I wanted to live in. Mary Oliver says, "if the world were only pain and logic, who would want it?" I knew about pain, and I revered logic, and they were very real, and they were also not enough. I didn't want pain and logic to be the sum of it. Plus I knew they weren't. I knew that plenty of other things were also real: love and beauty and ephemeral moments of joy, so maybe also other miracles.

And as it turns out, the miracles aren't even the most difficult part - at least not for me, at least not at this stage of the game. It's not the amazing stuff Jesus does that's so hard to swallow. It's the stuff he says. "Love your enemies." "Give away all your possessions." "Follow me." "Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." And in Luke's version, it's not even softened to Matthew's "Blessed are the poor in spirit..." (which, interesting side note: Google tried to auto-fill the *in spirit* part every time I typed Blessed are the poor.) "Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." Give me a blind man seeing any day of the week.

If there's such a thing as a charismatic-philosopher, Dallas Willard was one, and I don't think I've ever quoted him in a sermon in eighteen years of this work, but here's what he says about believing in miracles. "We don't believe something by merely saying we believe it, or even when we believe that we believe it. We believe something when we act as if it were true." So, when we live like resurrection happens, that's when we've gotten over the hump. When we decide that we don't want a world of only pain and logic, and reorient our lives accordingly, that's when we start to see, as Mary Oliver goes on to suggest, that either nothing or everything is miraculous - even "the light that can shine out of a life." Dallas Willard's point is that it's not the talking about the miracles that's so hard; people can talk about them (and have been arguing about them seemingly) forever. The hard part is living life as if water can become wine and storms can still, especially when that doesn't happen so often, and we get a lot more of the pain and logic, and we have to look so hard for the light that can shine out of a life.

My getting over my issues with miracles isn't just saying that I believe in things I can't explain. And it doesn't mean that I now pray for miracles on demand. And it certainly doesn't mean that they happen to me. It means trying, emphasis on trying, to live like the kind of person who sees the world as a painful place, a logical place - and as a healing place, and an illogically luminous place. It means trying to live like miracles could happen. It means trying to live like miracles happen. And that's hard enough, and somedays still very much a work in progress.

Which brings us back to: “Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.” “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.” What he says can be just as hard to deal with as the miracles.

In Mary Oliver’s poem suggesting we might want a world of more than pain and logic, the poet is traveling through a foreign airport and encounters a woman doing menial work. The poem, “Singapore,” is an uncomfortable and imperfect reflection on wealth and privilege and poverty and class. It’s awkward - the meeting and the meaning. Yet at one point she writes this about the woman she observes, “I don’t doubt for a minute that she loves her life. / And I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop and fly down to the river. / This probably won’t happen. / But maybe it will.” Is rising up and flying away any more ridiculous a thought than that the poor have the kingdom of God and that those who weep will laugh and that the hungry will be filled? And like the privileged poet and someone rich like me and maybe some others of us here, is it any more absurd to believe that we might come to understand that our wealth is not the end-all, be-all and that striving after the world’s praise and accolades will never fill the empty chambers? This probably won’t happen. But maybe it will. Ridiculous and hard to believe.

Learning to live a life with the miraculous can be challenging, and learning to live like these miraculous words are also true for some of us might be even more difficult. But this is the amazing thing about Jesus. His words blessing the poor and the hungry and the weeping and the hated are every bit as miraculous as his words blessing the bread or inviting Peter out into the deep water. Again and again, Jesus offers a world that is more than pain and logic. Whether by unstopping the ears of a deaf man or by inviting the rich young ruler to shake loose from all that weighs him down. He comes to show us up close God’s dream - how close we are to the kingdom, that laughter and full bellies and a certain upside-down-ness are right there. And he comes to show us how far we are from that kingdom. But his words pointing out the thin veneer of security some of us might want to cling to are also a miracle, a miracle piercing through all that would insulate and isolate us from the fullness of life.

What would it mean to believe all this? “We don’t believe something by merely saying we believe it, or even when we believe that we believe it. We believe something when we act as if it were true.” To act like the miracles of Jesus are true means reorienting our lives to make space for things we can’t explain or account for, leaving room for light and beauty, looking with wonder and awe at this world. To act like miracles are true means choosing a world that is more than pain and logic. To act like the miraculous words and teachings of Jesus are true isn’t all that different. It’s certainly not logical in this painful world. Believing his words means reorienting what brings us comfort and consolation, leaving room for laughter and more at the table, and looking around for the kingdom. Looking for the kind of world God wants. It means choosing what kind of world we want to live in. It means acting as if it were true.