

THREE THINGS I BELIEVE MORE AND MORE

There are three things that I believe more and more as the years go by:

- 1.) That God, who is revealed most in Jesus of Nazareth, loves us – and that this love is enormous, and personal, and purposeful, and is always seeking contact and response from us – and that this love is eternal. It never quits or blinks out on us.
- 2.) That more and more we can become aware of this God, feel the presence and the love, and turn our lives away from all that fights and denies this God – and move toward this God’s will, and purposes, and guidance, and WAY of being and caring and doing.
- 3.) That life is full of possibilities, and power, and potential – far beyond our understanding or comprehension. Therefore, especially in God’s presence, but sometimes just by being here, we experience or behold things that seem to us miraculous. Nevertheless, I do believe that God opens us to possibilities beyond all normal expectations, if we open ourselves to God’s guidance and power.

Now, that may seem less than pithy, and hard to remember. So let me put the same three things in shorter, less accurate, but more familiar phrases. There are three things that I believe with growing gratitude and certainty:

- 1.) That Jesus saves.
- 2.) That we can be born anew.
- 3.) That God answers prayer.

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We are in a very good season in this church, from my perspective, and also a reflective season – not a time to expand, but a time to strengthen the bonds, build lifts, make plans, and get ready for the next period of expansion. It is dangerous to upset the troops, and some preachers try hard never to do that. Sadly, some of them even succeed.

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Recently, I have been trying hard to get you to doubt, to reconsider, to rework some of your basic beliefs. At such times, I am always aware of my limited vocabulary, and aware that I raise issues whose borders disappear into mystery. But I also know that if we do not wrestle with such issues, we can never climb Jacob's Ladder.

So we spoke about the "Prime Directive" – that God does not shrink refrigerators, or stop Mack trucks. And God does not stop us from harming each other, except by changing our hearts. God guards free will, no matter what it costs. To add insult to injury, last week I told you about some things I no longer believe. I don't think the troops are badly shaken, but some of you are grumbling a bit. Our best Bible Teacher is grumbling that I am trying to take away all the miracles in the Bible. And happily, some of you are rethinking your expectations as faithful Christians. That's wonderful! Get strong in your faith. You are going to need to be.

It is very important for every one of us to stop, from time to time, and reassess what we believe and what we do not believe. What we believe and disbelieve is guiding our lives and impacting our choices all the time, whether we are conscious of it or not. Only, it isn't what we *say* we believe, but what we *truly* believe, that has the true impact. Both questions are critical. What we do believe is brought into focus by what we do not believe, and vice versa. False faith is a serious affair. In our culture, we hear a lot about broken hearts, but broken souls are even harder to mend than broken hearts. People who live their lives by a false faith end up with broken souls, and they have a hard time returning to faith in *anything* for a while – just like people with broken hearts don't want a new love relationship for a while. Part of the travail of spiritual awakening is finding ourselves living in a world where the principles of alienation operate everywhere. Suddenly we are much more aware of the mayhem and anguish everywhere. If we add to that a lot of faith in false precepts and start counting on false expectations, then we get betrayed constantly – and not only by our sin, but also by our faith.

In Christendom, faith means we trust the authority and power of Jesus Christ. The longer form of that precept is that we trust the power and love and authority of the God who chooses to reveal himself to us in Jesus, who is the Christ. But the point is, as Christians we choose to bet *everything* on what Jesus tells us, and shows us, and promises us, and does for us. Our faith does not mean anything else. It does not mean

we win the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. It does not mean we get to control what's going on here, or that we get to decide who will be blessed, healed, hurt, or converted. It does not mean that we suddenly get to be perfect, or make no more mistakes, or hold only right opinions. It does not mean that we get to have life easy, or that everybody will love us. IT MEANS WE TRUST THE AUTHORITY AND POWER AND LOVE OF JESUS CHRIST. The only other thing it means is that we get to feel the presence of the Holy Spirit more and more – we get to feel the growing relationship between ourselves and Jesus. And Jesus is always introducing us to some of His friends. The funny thing is that after a while, those get to be the very things we care about most.

I.) JESUS SAVES

In any case, however disappointed you are that I do not believe some of the things you want me to, there are some things I do believe as much or more than any other human on earth. I believe that Jesus saves. I have been watching Him do it for over fifty years. New lives for old – for people young, old, and in-between. People in impossible situations; people who have lost all courage, and all awareness of their worth; people caught in meaningless prisons of luxury; people committing various forms of suicide. One crack in the shield – one glimmer of invitation – and Jesus is right there, with seemingly unbelievable powers of transformation – healing, forgiveness, grace, vision – and the inevitable “calling” to be who we really are, and to do what we were sent here to do. I also believe that Jesus saves us when we pass through death. But that's easy to believe after years of watching Him in action here against all the little deaths.

II.) WE CAN BE BORN ANEW

And I do believe, truly believe, that we can be born anew – get out of the driver's seat, and abandon our determination to do everything our own way – and turn more and more of our choices and energies into living by the light and guidance and mercy of the Holy Spirit. All my life, people have been saying to me, “Well, nobody really changes. People never really change.” And by that they mean thieves will always be thieves, liars will always be liars, boring people will always be boring, and so forth. Well, I don't know where they keep themselves, but I have been watching dramatic changes in people of all ages, for decades! Of course, we do not change basic personality traits; they are God-given. We are supposed to learn how to use them – to train and hone what we

are given – not change them. Elephants are not supposed to act like butterflies. We are not supposed to get the same thing from Jean that we get from Rodger (not to imply that either one is an elephant, or a butterfly). Nevertheless, turning life over to the Holy Spirit is like being born all over again, and all reality is different ever afterward.

III.) GOD ANSWERS PRAYER

But mostly today I want to talk about prayer, and especially about the miracles that prayer can bring. I much prefer to do this in a retreat setting, where we have a whole weekend to at least dip our toes into the subject. But inevitably – and it's not your fault – but inevitably, sermons about the Prime Directive, God's restraint, and the orderliness of the universe do make some people feel like they are hearing the lecture about "There is no Santa Claus." So here is a ten-minute introductory teaser to prayer and miracles. Lots of you are old pros in such matters and don't need me to tell you any of this. But if you are new to such subjects, for pity's sake, do not leave it at the ten-minute level.

First of all, *of course I believe in miracles*. I'm much too ignorant not to. All miracles are a matter of ignorance. For God, there are no miracles. God knows what is possible and how it works. God made it. Jesus never thinks or talks in terms of miracles. He knows He is surprising people, but HE is not surprised. He knows what will work, and under what conditions.

In Luke 18:35-43, a blind man is sitting by the roadside, begging. When he realizes Jesus is passing by, he shouts, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Some people sternly order him to be quiet, but he shouts even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Calling Jesus "Son of David" is the blind man's way of saying, "I recognize that you are the Messiah. I know you have the authority to heal me, if only you will."

That does it! Jesus stops in His tracks and orders the man to be brought to Him. Then Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" Talk about dumb questions! Only, it is not dumb. The man has called to Jesus' deeper identity, and Jesus wants to know how far he wants to go with this faith thing. Take a hint: If you don't have moxie enough to ask for it, Jesus probably won't do it for you. And if you don't think Jesus is able to do it for you, He usually won't. I think that is really nasty, or at least unkind; I want Jesus to do everything He

possibly can for me, regardless of what I think or do or believe or ask for, and whether or not I have bothered to grow, or learn, or commit, or be faithful – in other words, regardless of whether or not it will last, or do any good, or be used for good. Except that is not how it usually works. Anyway, the blind man says, “Lord, I want my sight back.” And Jesus says: “*Have back your sight; your recognition of who I am and your trust in what that really means has opened the way for it to happen.*”

Is that a miracle? It is to me! Can I do that? No. If I *could* do that, it would not be a miracle. That is, I would know that it could happen and call on it, and it wouldn’t seem strange or unusual to me. It did not seem strange to Jesus. “You want your sight back? You know I can do this for you. Here you go ...” That’s what fascinates me. How does Jesus see reality? Let me suggest a couple of things.

The first big problem is: I think Jesus is *breaking* the natural order when He heals this blind man, but Jesus thinks He is *restoring* the natural order when He heals this blind man. I look around and assume I am dealing with reality, with things as they are, with things as they are supposed to be. Jesus looks at this world and is aghast at the twisted, convoluted, deformed condition of things. The beauty is still here, but marred and sketchy. The joy is still here, but crippled with fear and doubt. The truth is still here, but contorted by pride and greed and isolation. This place has heard of God but does not truly know God, and so the true patterns are all corrupted. And evil – the spirit of deceit and destruction – hangs over everything. In the old language: Satan has this realm under bondage.

What an incredible thing it must be to “see” this world through the eyes of Jesus: to “see” people as He sees them; to look at all things and know their true purpose, what they are intended to be, and maybe someday *will* be – but then also to see the “shadow” that hangs over it all. Oh my! How could He endure it? Jesus constantly makes remarks, tells parables, and does things that make it clear He sees very differently. And He says to us: “*You have eyes but do not see, you have ears but do not hear. Wake up! Come with me and be free.*” Meanwhile, He looks for windows, channels, and “connect places” where He can let light and power from the true realm intersect with this broken realm. Or put another way: He keeps watching for chances to let things here return to their true form. So He finds a man with a glimpse of the fact that this realm is not the whole of reality. Even better, the man is willing to let

Jesus' true authority operate without coercion. "I want my sight back." Jesus opens the window to the true realm, and *wha-la!* Of course, I think Jesus is doing something extra-phenomenally special, but Jesus thinks He is merely smoothing away the aberration – the wrongness that never should have been in the first place. I think Jesus is breaking the natural order; Jesus thinks He is restoring the natural order.

I am enthralled by how many times Jesus is angry when He heals. He does not like the corruption. It's almost like He takes disease and sin as a personal insult – an affront to the Creator. And when given the chance, when allowed to use His power without breaking free will, He does so eagerly – yet also and always with restraint, lest He overstep His mission here.

And that brings us to the second thing: Jesus does not want us to get hung up on miracles, or think that miracles are the core or purpose of His being here. He constantly tells the people He helps *to please keep quiet about it*. Few are grateful enough to obey. From the forty days in the wilderness – when Jesus sees through Satan's temptation to base His ministry on miracles – to His last day on earth, Jesus is careful and cautious about letting the power show. If you could walk on water, would you do so only once – and in the wee hours of the morning, when only a few people you could trust to keep their mouths shut about it were watching? THE TRUTH IS THAT WHILE MIRACLES COME FROM FAITH, FAITH DOES NOT COME FROM MIRACLES. To quote Dostoevsky: "The genuine realist, if he is an unbeliever, will always find strength and ability to disbelieve in the miraculous, and if he is confronted with a miracle as an irrefutable fact, he would rather disbelieve his own senses than admit the fact. *Faith does not ... spring from the miracle, but the miracle from faith.*" (Emphasis mine.)

The story of the feeding of the five thousand – however you deal with the miracle itself – is not in the New Testament to wow us with Jesus' miraculous powers. Rather, the full story tells of Jesus' deep disappointment and discouragement that this event totally sidetracks the people from everything Jesus cares about and is trying to accomplish. The miracle does not lead to repentance, to being born anew, to obedience or faith or a true relationship with God. Jesus literally runs from the crowds because they are turning His real purpose and mission into a mockery. You may think the feeding of the five thousand is wonderful,

but Jesus is very sad about it. He is sorry He did it. (Matthew 14; Mark 6; Luke 9; John 6)

In any case, I suspect that from Jesus' perspective, the true miracle is that we can be so blind to God: that we can remain so distant, frightened, and rebellious, and so willing to go on doing it our own way – doing it alone – no matter how many times we have proved beyond the shadow of any doubt that it will never work our way, or get better, or provide anybody anywhere with what they really want or need or deeply care about. To Jesus, that would seem truly miraculous.

Jurgen Moltmann says: “Jesus’ healings are not supernatural miracles in a natural world. They are the only truly ‘natural’ things in a world that is unnatural, demonized and wounded.” Philip Yancy says: “Death, decay, entropy, and destruction are the true suspensions of God’s laws; miracles are the early glimpses of restoration.”

The Seven Deadly Sins are all aberrations of necessary survival principles. The husband who cheats, the wife who withdraws, the cancer cells that turn against “the body” – whether in an individual, a family, an organization, or a nation – it all reminds us that we live in a broken realm, a realm gone wrong. How telling it is that when something is restored, made right, put back as it was intended to be, we call it a miracle.

Do I believe in miracles? Oh yes! I am so ignorant – and the world is so wrong – that I have no choice. For God is still here, and the true pattern, though often hidden, is still all around us. Faith is trust in the true authority, instead of trust in or contentment with all the false rules of rebellion, pain, disease, hatred, fear, and guilt that match Satan’s dominion and bondage.

So a friend asked me, “Do you *really* believe that God answers prayer?”

I wanted to say, “Do you really believe that prayer is a question?” I think prayer is a WAY OF LIFE – a word we use for the most important relationship we will ever have – an ongoing dialogue between us and God. But my friend wouldn’t have understood this superb comment. He would have thought I was putting him off or being a smart-aleck.

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So I said to him what I tell you: I truly believe God answers prayer. For years I have watched, participated in, and even been privileged to be agent of many miracles. But I am always uncomfortable when you talk me into blabbing about it, because Jesus warns us not to do that. And I am aware that some of you want to talk about such things as a way to sidetrack yourselves from what Jesus is really about: repentance, being born anew, living lives of praise and thanksgiving and obedience to the Holy Spirit. Do not go to the circus for the sideshow; go for the main event – crucifixion and resurrection ... both His and ours.

I know that some of you pray for me. I wouldn't want to have to make it through my days without that. I pray for you too – do you know that? Only, I have a whole lot more in mind for you than I guess some of you realize. I like it a lot when you are physically blessed, and sometimes that just comes flowing out of spiritual health. But that is not really what it's about, why we are here, or what we are here about. All that matters flows out of the life and love we have with our Lord. Apart from that communion, it is all an empty shell.