

*Beneath the Surface*

Lessons: John 2:1-11, Isaiah 62:1-5

Father Roland Murphy – Carmelite monk in the Catholic church, one of the translators of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, and an Old Testament professor at Duke – was explaining away the miracles to his class. Joshua and the sun standing still was a bad translation. The Red Sea was actually the Reed Marsh dried up by the hot wind that allowed foot-walking but mired Pharaoh's chariots. All these explanations made sense, but one of the students asked what others were thinking. "What about the miracles you can't explain away?" Father Murphy replied, "Well, ...some miracles you just have to take straight!"

For centuries, people's faith hinged on the miracles they saw. Even today, some people "expect a miracle" with "blind faith." They willfully suspend their disbelief for a picture of Jesus on a cloth or the disappearance of a cancer without explanation. We have one of those trash cans with the lid that opens by itself. It quit working. I checked the batteries, took it apart and put it back together again. Nothing. This week and months later, it starts opening every time we walk past it. Things happen for no reason, and it's a miracle!

Many suspend belief and quit faith because, after all, we modern minds really know miracles don't happen. We live in a world of facts and scientific truths. We know that behind the magic there is always a trick. It may look like bypassing the laws of nature, but sooner or later we learn better laws that explain away the magic.

We have played this game in church circles, too. Scholars through the ages have tried to "explain" the wine from water as some symbolic parable about the feast of the new marriage of God and the bride the church, or that water from wine is a foreshadowing of Jesus sacrificial death. I grew up in a tradition that rejected alcohol, at least *officially*. So my Sunday School teacher said Jesus made non-alcoholic wine that tasted so good it fooled people. That really would be a miracle!

The real problem here is our definition of a miracle: "Something God can do when we can't." What if a "miracle" is more than a magic trick from God? What if our idea of a miracle limits our ability to see God at work right in front of us everyday? What if we have stopped expecting miracles when miracles are happening all around us all the time?

How can we see miracles differently? Let's take an example of a miracle, like turning water into wine. Mary wants her God-son Jesus to do something that ordinary humans cannot do. ...A miracle just to save the party? It is more than that. The celebration and joy and honor of Mary's friends are at stake.

On the surface, it was not so big a request. And it was a good thing to do. Why not? Mary probably thought what my father always said to me, "If you don't ask, the answer is already 'no.'"

Isn't that the way we expect God to work? We ask, because it never hurts to ask. After all, Jesus said, "Ask anything in my name, and I will do it." So, we get out our prayer list of the things we cannot do and wish God would do. Maybe trivial or childish things like the new red bicycle I prayed for until I gave up. Or maybe life-or-death things for the people we love, like the prayers we all have prayed at some time. We ask for a miracle, because we can't do anything else but ask. Sometimes our love and need are so great that we suspend our disbelief, ignore our intellectual skepticism – and ask anyway.

When I was a youth, we learned a praise song that said, "God can do anything, anything, anything. God can do anything fail. He can save, He can keep, He can cleanse, and He will. God can do anything but fail."

As I got older, I wanted more than the spiritual *anything* – saving, keeping, cleansing. I wanted the miracle *something* God could do that we couldn't seem to do. Back then, it was my friends who were dying in a war when I was praying for peace. Back then, it was my sitting in a church service during the most segregated hour in America while a Baptist preacher got assassinated for saying the obvious. Now, we have gotten to the place where color is only skin deep (I wish), and where we know peace needs more than a chance. Peace and justice are something we can't do, or maybe just won't do, so only God can do. Peace still needs a miracle, so we pray. Justice still needs us to do more than pray.

And when our prayers go unanswered, we think there is something wrong. I've spent a lifetime in the ministry with people who prayed for a miracle and did not get the only miracle they wanted.

So, they thought there was something wrong with them. Surely something they had done in their past had turned the water to vinegar instead of wine. Maybe it was some good they had not done somewhere back there that God had not forgotten, and caused God to say "no" to a good thing now. Maybe God wasn't actually punishing them, but God was ignoring their genuine need for a miracle that meant a lot more than more wine at a party.

Have you thought something like this to yourself?

- If God can do miracles – the good things that ought to be done that we cannot do...?
- If God loves us like we hear and God forgives us for our sins like we hear...?
- Then what is wrong with God? Has God quit listening? Has God quit doing miracles – at least for me? Has God started ignoring some prayers because there are too many prayers for miracles everyday?

When we pray for a real need and the answer is no answer, we quit believing that God can do much for us or for the world. We call it a “faith crisis,” and we think there must be something wrong with us.

But we also think there must be something wrong with God, ...or at least the God they told us about and we believed in. The world is full of people who did not get their answer to prayer, people who could not get God to do what they could not do. So they quit church, or they quit God. Or, we keep coming to church. We just quit expecting any miracles.

What if the problem is with us more than with God? What if we stop expecting miracles, because we are asking for too little? What if we want the surface miracles that we can taste like wine, or see like the lame walking, or hear like angels singing in the night? Then we would believe. Then we would keep faith. Then we would expect more and expect more often ...because it would take less faith from us. And we would have to trust God a little less if God answered our prayers and did what we asked.

In a way, we could see Mary’s telling Jesus what to do like a prayer. She had the advantage of talking to Jesus face-to-face. It was easier for her to have faith, but she was still asking Jesus to do what she wanted that she could not do.

Jesus hears her prayer differently than she prays it. He looks beneath the surface of her plea. “Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come.”

Most of the accounts of Jesus’ miracles take place out in the open, in front of everyone, because his hour had already come. But here people keep drinking the wine with no idea how it got there. It is the one miracle that Jesus does that is NOT a public wonder of his Messiah/Savior power. Why did he hesitate, and why did

they remember? The text tells us. “It was the first of his signs, and revealed his glory; and his followers believed in him.”

Some miracles are easier to “take straight.” But when we look past the event, or the magic, or the strange thing that happens, what we see is NOT a trick. We see the “sign.” What happens points beyond itself to something greater. What is there on the surface points deeper to the place where life really happens. The miracle is not the point. It is just a sign that points to something more.

Jesus does not want to turn the water to wine, because it is a premature “sign.” Once people see the “signs” he is traveling down the road and can’t turn back. But he knows wine is not the need. It is deeper than the surface. Mary’s prayer is for human joy and celebration in a new beginning. What better place for him to begin! His coming will be good news for all people. His coming will be saving sins and redeeming nations. His coming will be open doors to the outcasts and mercy for the sinner. His coming will be the love of God at work in the world of evil.

The people at the party never saw the sign, the miracle. Well, some did! Remember? “His followers believed in him.” And that simple truth is the message in the miracle, the lesson in the sign!

Jesus came to be God with us. Jesus died and rose again to be with us always and everywhere as Holy Spirit. In Christ, we know that God is working, and the signs are everywhere. God is NOT just working when we can’t work. God is all around us, working with us, and working through us. We followers don’t just see the miracles in what we cannot do that God does. We followers see the signs of God’s love in the people who love us, in the blessings that happen to us, in the strength that comes to us in weakness, in the light we have in the darkness, in the peace we hardly believe is there in the storm that blows around us, in the justice that comes in spite of death.

Yes, there really are some miracles that we just have to take straight. All of the signs point straight to a Savior who will never forsake us, who guides us in the day and guards us in the night. We serve a Savior who does not leave us when the cancer does not go away, who sits with us through the sleepless nights when loneliness is our only companion, who is our deep breath when panic threatens in a time of testing, ...that thought that will not go away until we listen, that friend who sticks close, ...that sign that shows up like a milepost on our journey to remind us that we are making progress and not the same person we were a couple of signs back. We are followers who see life in every glass of water, grace in every piece of bread. We are followers and we are on the right road. We know, because the signs are everywhere.

I don't pray for red bicycles anymore, and I don't give God the credit when things that were broken start working again. God's work is more important than that, and the signs I am looking for everyday are small signs and big banners of grace at work, love that keeps the cosmos going in the middle of the what we can't seem to do and what we surprise ourselves in doing from time to time.

Maybe the real miracle is not just the signs of what God is doing that are all around, but the way God makes us signs of grace. We do the miracles, too.