

***GOD THE MAGICIAN***  
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**University Congregational Church**  
**February 14, 2010**

**Reading: Luke 6: 6-11 (NRSV)**

**On another Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come and stand here.” He got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?” After looking around at all of them, he said to him, “Stretch out your hand.” He did so, and his hand was restored. But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.**

The scene I am about to describe to you is one that I have witnessed hundreds of times in 35 years of ministry. I enter the bedroom, or hospice unit, or a hospital room to call on a parishioner. Perhaps he or she is dying or suffers from a ravaging illness or disease. Often there are friends or family members there. It is my custom to offer a pastoral prayer before I leave. Someone will suggest, “Yes, we need a miracle prayer.” Or, “We need God’s intervention to save Sally – or Jack.”

I find this to be quite an amazing request. I look at the sick or dying parishioner. He or she is typically an old person, sometimes in their 80’s or 90’s. And I think, “Now there is a miracle! A human being who

has lived to such a generous old age.” I look at the many miracles of pharmacology, skilled nursing care, and professional medical care. I look at the miracle of this person who is clearly loved and cared for by friends and family, even unto his or her last breath. Wow! What a gift from God.

I remember such an incident that happened just down the street from our house when we lived in Columbus, Ohio. Police cars, fire and rescue, and an ambulance were parked in the street, lights flashing. I went into the house and saw emergency medical technicians kneeled over the body of a four-year-old boy. They were performing CPR. An IV had been inserted into the vein of his tiny hand.

The mother and neighbors were in the living room. They were frantic. I would even say hysterical. One of the women, an avid fundamentalist, saw me enter the room. She thrust a Bible into my hand and demanded, “You’re a minister. Now read something from the Bible. Give us a prayer that will save Tommy’s life.”

I said as calmly as I could, “Don’t you know? Tommy’s life has always been in the hands of God.”

The idea that God intervenes in some human calamities and rescues or heals some human beings, usually thought to be “the faithful,” is a common Christian assumption. I emphasize “some” human beings

and highlight the fact of not all human beings, even other “faithful Christians,” are necessarily saved. Such a belief assumes that God is omnipotent and has the power to intercede in natural processes and pluck a life out of the death grip of pancreatic cancer, grab a plummeting airplane out of the sky, or catch a person falling off of a 70-story skyscraper. The idea that God is not only “First Cause” but also a force more powerful than the strength of nature is the basic faith premise of many people. They believe that God is like that: the cause of everything that happens and a power greater than the laws of nature. If God is neither of these powers God is not the one true God. And certainly if I do not believe in these two faith assumptions I am not considered a faithful Christian.

This is the foundation and substance of belief for many Christians: God is the cause of everything that happens; and, God can intercede in natural and human events. If neither of these is true God is not to be believed. An example of such faith is found in C. S. Lewis’ book, *Surprised by Joy*. He wrote of such adolescent faith regarding the death of his mother by cancer. Jack was only ten years old.

“My mother’s death was the occasion of what some (but not I) might regard as my first religious experience. When her case was pronounced hopeless I remembered what I had been taught; that prayers offered in faith would be granted. I

accordingly set myself to produce by will power a firm belief that my prayers for her recovery would be successful; and, as I thought, I achieved it. When nevertheless she died I shifted my ground and worked myself into a belief that there was to be a miracle. The interesting thing is that my disappointment produced no results beyond itself. The thing hadn't worked, but I was used to things not working, and I thought no more about it. I think the truth is that the belief into which I had hypnotized myself was itself too irreligious for its failure to cause any religious revolution. I had approached God, or my idea of God, without awe, even without fear. He was, in my mental picture of this miracle, to appear neither as Savior nor as Judge, but merely as a magician; and when He had done what was required of Him I supposed He would simply – well, go away. It never crossed my mind that the tremendous contact which I solicited should have any consequences beyond restoring the status quo. I imagine that a “faith” of this kind is often generated in children and that its disappointment is of no religious importance; just as the things believed in, if they could happen and be only as the child pictures them, would be of no religious importance either.”<sup>1</sup>

The young C. S. Lewis is like many people who believe that God is a magician. They look to God to pull a hat trick, or a little slight of hand, or a wave of the wand for everything to be returned to normal.

The problem with God the magician is the fact that life and death, sickness and wholeness, mental health and mental illness are not subject to illusion. These are not the stuff of vapor and

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955), pp. 20-21.

phantasmagoria. They are biological, physiological, and chemical realities that work in the molecular and cellular structures we know to be the human body.

Now someone might object and say, “Yes, but you just read from Luke’s gospel the story of a man whose withered hand was healed in the synagogue on the Sabbath day.”

Yes, I did. And there is no doubt from reading this story that even the scribes and Pharisees expected a healing to take place. And according to the story the withered hand was restored. But the point of this story is not the physical miracle. There were all kinds of faith healers roaming around the countryside in first century Palestine just as there are in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America.

The truth is that the scribes and Pharisees could not care less about the man with the withered hand. What happened to him was immaterial to them. They were most interested in whether Jesus would violate a strict interpretation of Mosaic Law on the Sabbath. Their own understanding of righteousness was confined to a very narrow and rigid maintenance of prescribed rules for living. Their interest is whether or not Jesus would subscribe to and obey their

inflexible purity codes. They wanted to discredit Jesus' moral veracity and prove that he was not a good Jew.

Now this question of whether or not Jesus was morally pure goes deeper than the conduct of the carpenter. The deeper moral issue is the standing of the man with the withered hand. Under strict purity codes any kind of deformity, malformation, or disease such as leprosy or hemophilia were indications of impurity. A person who suffered from these or any other affliction was thought to be fouled and unclean. Now I am not just saying they were medically contagious. Their malady was symptomatic of a deeper contamination. Their pathos was more than skin deep. Their impurity suggested corruption of their soul. They were not whole persons before God.

The man with the withered hand stands in the synagogue on the Sabbath day as one who represents defilement that stretches beyond his hand. It is amazing that he is in the room at all. You see, there is a social stigma about him, a religious stigma. And I tell you that such social isolation is just as common today. Ask anyone who is a paraplegic, or an amputee, or has skin cancer or vitiligo. The same dynamics often occur when someone is going

through a divorce, or fighting cancer, or has HIV. Most of their friends and neighbors are uncomfortable around them. They are not sure what to say. They soon weary of the chronic nature of the disease and fade away from the relationship. And even though most would not think of it, there is a deep unconscious feeling that these folks are somehow degenerated beyond their physical symptoms. Some will say that God is punishing them. The patient or the unemployed person or the divorcee will even say to him or her self, “What did I do to deserve this?” Make no mistake about it. Underscoring every sickness and disability is a presumption of moral degradation.

In Luke’s story, Jesus gets to the heart of this problem of social stigma. He asks the man to come and stand before them. He invites the man into the center of the conversation. He is no longer a pawn in a religious argument, but a human being brought into the center of the Physician’s care. Jesus gives the man with the withered hand the same “standing,” if you will, as the scribes, Pharisees, worshipping community, and himself. The healing of the man begins with his restoration to the faith community.

Then Jesus reframes the question of Sabbath law. He is not interested in a strict reading or interpretation of the law. Jesus does not care about what one can or cannot do on the Sabbath. He asks, rather, if it is right to do good on the Sabbath, even to save a life. Jesus never doubts that the function of Sabbath was always the about the wholeness of human beings. The purpose of the Sabbath has always been redemptive. So why would there ever be any question about the function of Sabbath worship? Of course, in the synagogue on a Sabbath day one would actually expect the work of restoration to be the primary order of worship. Religious or irreligious the only humane answer to the question is to make people whole and even save their lives if that is possible.

Luke declares that the man's hand is restored. The question that is the heart of this story, and others like it, asks, is whether the hand was physically cured or if the social context is healed. Dom Crossan wrote,

“This is the central problem of what Jesus was doing in his healing miracles. Was he curing the disease through an intervention in the physical world, or was he healing the illness through an intervention in the social world? I presume that Jesus who did not and could not cure that disease or any other one, healed the poor man's illness by refusing to accept the disease's ritual uncleanness and social ostracization...Such an interpretation may seem to destroy



the miracle. But miracles are not changes in the physical world so much as changes in the social world, and it is society that dictates in any case, how we see, use, and explain that physical world. It would, of course, be nice to have certain miracles available to change the physical world if we could, but it would be much more desirable to make certain changes in the social one, which we can. We ourselves can already make the physical world totally uninhabitable; the question is whether we can make the social world humanly habitable.”<sup>2</sup>

The fact of matter is that people’s physical bodies are sometimes healed, either for reasons not known to us or due to medical and medicinal practices. Sometimes they are not, regardless of fervent faith or the best practices of the medical arts. People’s bodies are healed whether they deserve it or not, believe in God or not, accept Jesus as the Christ or not. But that is not the issue before us. In fact, I think that when we take up a lot of time arguing over faith healing we are only doing so to avoid the real challenge of the gospel. That question is the restorative nature of our community of faith. Is ours the church where human beings find wholeness; and where each one has a standing in our community?

The only gesture that the church can offer in the name of Jesus Christ is the outstretched hand. In commenting on this story St. Ambrose wrote:

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<sup>2</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), p, 82.

“Then you hear the words of the Lord say, ‘Stretch forth your hand.’ That is the common and universal remedy. You who think that you have a healthy hand beware lest it is withered by greed or by sacrilege. Hold it out often. Hold it out to the poor person who begs you. Hold it out to help your neighbor, to give protection to the widow, to snatch from harm one whom you see subjected to unjust insult. Hold it out to God for your sins. The hand is stretched forth, then it is healed.”

I dare say if the Christian church were the church of the outstretched hand there would be many more miracles for us to digest than the fickle magic too often attributed to God. We would see the miracle of human beings graced with understanding and acceptance. We would see the miracle of human beings restored to themselves and their families. We would see the miracle of human beings at peace with the ebb and flow of life and death.

Now someone might protest, “What of God’s hand in all of this? Where is the power of the almighty to sight to the blind, make straight to crooked limbs, give sound to deaf ears, and make clean to scabs of lepers?” I believe that God is the story of one who expands God’s providence to a man forced to the margins of society. God is the Sabbath who enlarges the walls of the synagogue and gives hospitality to a wounded soul. God is the voice of freedom that says, “Stand up and take

your place in the community of life.” God is the resistance to the *status quo* of self-righteousness and the regal presumptions of purity.

The late John O’Donohue suggests that it is the work of the faith community to bless the space between us. To bless someone is to invoke the Spirit of life upon them. It means to evoke a sense of warmth and protection, suggesting that no life is alone or unreachable. No matter what happens to our bodies, the life and light of every human being is sheltered and loved profoundly.<sup>3</sup> Let me share with you this story of healing. It is told of Ludwig van Beethoven.

As you know Beethoven was born into a family of musicians. He spent many hours as a child practicing his music every day. By the age of eleven he was composing and conducting. In his late teens he went to Vienna for deeper study.

Years later, as an adult, Beethoven was taking a walk in the evening. He passed a cobbler’s house. He heard someone practicing one of his own compositions. Beethoven stopped to listen. The young voice of a girl said, “I wish I could hear a real musician play this properly.”

Beethoven knocked on the door and was invited in. He noticed the young lady sitting at the piano and realized that she was blind. He offered

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<sup>3</sup> John O’Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), p. xiii.

to play the piece for her. For the next hour and a half Beethoven played the piano for the blind girl. Darkness had fallen and the lone candle in the room had burned out. But the bright light of the moon shone through the curtained window and Beethoven played on.

It is said that he was so inspired by the beauty of the night skies and the appreciation of his music by the young lady that he composed his famous “Moonlight Sonata.”

Beethoven blessed the space between himself and the girl. Through his music he stretched out his hand and she was made whole. Her blindness was immaterial.

The challenge for us is to avoid chasing after metaphysical impossibilities. The challenge for us is to be the church of the outstretched hand.

*Finis*