

SIGHTLESS AMONG MIRACLES

Long ago I considered becoming an Episcopal priest. I went to see the only Episcopal priest I knew at the time and asked him what it meant to be a priest. He told me, “You get to see a lot of water made into wine.” I never became a priest — for reasons that are too lengthy to describe here. Yet here I am, 40-something years later, standing in a pulpit to tell you I have seen a lot of water made into wine.

Last time I was up here I talked about an apparent healing miracle that involved a co-worker crippled by multiple sclerosis who was made to walk. Today, in keeping with our gospel reading, I want to tell you about a latter-day miracle of the loaves and fishes that occurred in our own midst. You probably never heard about it, which is one of the points I want to discuss this morning.

For many years before COVID, I was part of the group from Holy Trinity that periodically served meals at the St. Vincent DePaul soup kitchen. One summer Sunday evening we were unexpectedly confronted with a much larger crowd than usual. It was late in the month, and people had gone through their food stamp allotments. We started to run out of food, and the line still snaked out the door.

Where were we going to get enough to feed all these people? Our crew chief started to panic. But just then a van pulled up at the side entrance and began unloading trays of sandwiches, chips and everything else we needed to feed the hungry. These were leftovers from the pro golf tournament in Cromwell that had just wrapped up. To the van driver, this was merely an act of charity, nothing more. To the desperate soup kitchen volunteers, it might as well have been a miracle of the loaves and fishes.

We imagine that an event must be accompanied by Hollywood special effects in order to qualify as a miracle. But in my experience, miracles are rarely signaled with more than a nod and a wink. They are so tightly woven into the fabric of life that they just seem *real*. You don't need God's signature on creation to recognize a master at work.

Look no farther than the wedding at Cana, the occasion for Jesus' first miracle. The host had run out of wine, and Jesus' mother turned to him to save the day. Why she thought her son could do anything about it, Lord only knows. He had never done anything miraculous before. But after a brief protest, Jesus told the servants to fill six big stone jars with water. You know the rest of the story. The thing is, nobody at the wedding feast knew that a miracle had taken place except for the servants who filled the stone jars with water. Even the steward wondered why the host had waited until the end of the party to bring out his best wine.

Now, you can look at what happened at the soup kitchen and say it was a coincidence that a van from the golf tournament just happened to show up when the food was running out. Of course it was — if that's how you choose to look at it. The depth psychologist Carl Jung had another term for such an uncanny coincidence. He called it “synchronicity.”

To claim that two events with no causal connection can be linked by something more than mere coincidence would challenge conventional notions of reality. Yet we have all had the uncanny sense of seemingly unrelated events coming together in a way that suggests there is some underlying pattern or purpose at work. Of course, since the human brain is wired for pattern recognition, we are predisposed to make imaginative leaps when the laws of probability would suffice. On the other hand, we may dismiss an unlikely congruence of events as mere coincidence simply because we find it too unsettling to consider the alternative.

Miracles, like beauty, are essentially in the eye of the beholder. This may explain why there is so little agreement on the subject. Must an event defy the laws of nature to qualify as a full-fledged miracle? Or is it enough for it merely to occur at an opportune moment, like the arrival of the food van at the soup kitchen?

“There are only two ways to live your life,” Albert Einstein once suggested. “One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.” Of the two, I mainly gravitate toward the miraculous, without making much of a fuss about nature versus the supernatural. John Donne wrote, “There is nothing that God hath established in a constant course of nature, and which therefore is done every day, but would seem a Miracle, and exercise our admiration, if it were done but once.” What’s he saying here? That a lot of stuff we take for granted because it happens all the time would seem like a miracle if it only happened once. Ever watch the amazement on a baby’s face when it sees something commonplace for the first time?

The true wonder to me is that, for most of us, most of the time, the stupefying fact of our own existence can appear so ordinary. So why don’t we always see life as a miracle? The problem, I suspect, is that we just aren’t paying enough attention. As some of you know, my wife is Jewish. Over the years I’ve gotten pretty conversant with Reform Judaism. There’s a prayer from their sabbath liturgy that says, “We walk sightless among miracles.” It goes on:

*Help us to see, wherever we gaze, that the bush
burns unconsumed. And we, clay touched by God,
will reach out for holiness, and exclaim in wonder:
How filled with awe is this place, and we did not
know it!*

The bush in this case refers to the one the fugitive Moses encountered in the wilderness while tending his father-in-law's flocks on the slopes of Mt. Horeb: "There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed." Moses turned aside to see, and on this turning turned the whole history of Western religion. The Lord duly noted that Moses had turned aside to see, and spoke to him from the bush. He identified himself as the God of his ancestors and sent Moses back into Egypt to confront the pharaoh and to deliver the Hebrew people from their bondage.

The Sabbath prayer ends with the exclamation, "How filled with awe is this place, and we did not know it!" There are echoes here of the patriarch Jacob's encounter with the Lord while he dreamed of angels ascending and descending on a ladder. Again, the Lord introduced himself in the dream as the God of his ancestors. He promised that his descendants would be as numerous as the dust of the earth. Jacob awakened from his dream and cried, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." It didn't seem to matter that he had dreamed the whole thing. "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

The burning bush that Moses encountered in the wilderness and Jacob's dream of a ladder reaching to heaven were singular

events. But the Jewish Sabbath prayer is clearly pointing to something else: "Help us to see, *wherever we gaze*, that the bush burns unconsumed."

I am reminded of lines from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem, "Aurora Leigh:"

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

When the Lord spoke to Moses from the burning bush, the first thing he told him was to remove his sandals "for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." If our Sabbath prayer were to be answered, and our eyes were no longer sightless but filled with seeing, the first thing we would have to do is put off our shoes. We would have discovered that the whole of creation is holy ground.

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