

HEALING MIRACLES TODAY

Decades ago I had a colleague named Sue who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Her disease progressed quickly. Before long she could only get around in one of those motorized handicapped scooters. I heard she would soon be forced to go on permanent disability. She was editor of a company publication and was having increasing trouble moving her fingers to use a typewriter. (This was in the days before word processors and desktop computers.)

One morning I was walking past the lobby on the floor where we both worked. The elevator door opened and Sue walked off. I said hello, took a few steps, then stopped and stared. Was this the same person who had gotten on the elevator in her handicapped scooter only the night before? Too startled for subtleties, I blurted out, "What happened to you?"

What happened to her is the subject of this sermon. At the time I thought of healing miracles as something that mostly happened in the Bible. I did not doubt that Jesus was able to cleanse lepers, make the lame to walk, even raise people from the dead, as he did with the little girl in this morning's gospel reading. But, of course, Jesus was the son of God. Was it possible for someone like my co-worker Sue to be healed of an incurable autoimmune disease in this day and age?

The term "miracle" is variously used to describe events that are contrary to the laws of nature, events that are highly unlikely but not contrary to the laws of nature or events that might be manifestations of natural laws as yet undiscovered.

There are fierce debates as to whether God would violate natural laws that he himself had ordained. If so, can they properly be considered natural laws? Events that are merely unlikely may or may not be regarded as miraculous, depending on your predisposition toward such things.

Without doubt, Christianity would be easy to swallow if it weren't for all those healing miracles. The Bible is full of visions and supernatural phenomena that can't be squared with modern science. This has forced believers to make uncomfortable choices. It causes some to insist on the literal truth of passages that were probably intended as allegory. Others dismiss as allegory passages that were clearly intended to be the literal truth.

The real issue is whether miracles happen at all. If so, what might they signify? Does God selectively ignore his own laws of nature, or does he operate according to laws we don't yet fully comprehend? As G.K. Chesterton observed, "Things that the old science [would] have rejected as miracles are hourly being asserted by the new science." Think about it: paramedics today routinely raise people from the dead and perform other

emergency medical procedures that would have been regarded as miracles in Jesus' day.

Thomas Jefferson hoped to reclaim Jesus from what he regarded as Christian mumbo-jumbo by producing his own edited gospel. It preserved Jesus' essential teachings while eliminating all the miracles. He took to the King James Bible with scissors and paste — literally. The result is a Jesus who talked a good game but posed little threat to the established order. This begs the question of why the authorities would even bother to have him killed.

Jefferson's determination to present Jesus without magic tricks inevitably winds up robbing his words of their magic as well. In the end, the gospels must be taken on their own terms, even if this forces us to make uncomfortable choices. Is Jesus the Son of God, or isn't he? And if he is who he says he is, then are we also who he says we are? "You are gods," he told his accusers, quoting one of the Psalms.

Jesus called on his followers to reclaim their birthright as beings who were created in God's image and given dominion over creation. He sent them out to heal the sick, to feed the hungry and to proclaim the coming of God's kingdom.

So there I was walking past the elevator at work one morning long ago when the doors opened and my colleague Sue walked off. "What happened to you?" I blurted out. Sue was a bit unsteady on her feet but definitely walking.

Sue was only too happy to tell me exactly what had happened to her. Her mother had been nagging her for months to come with her to a weekly healing service presided over by a Roman Catholic priest named Ralph DiOrio at a church in Worcester, Massachusetts. Sue had no faith that a priest could do what medical science could not. But she eventually agreed to go, if only to get her mother off her back.

The church was packed, and they wound up sitting in the balcony. Her first clue that something extraordinary was afoot occurred when Father DiOrio announced that a woman with multiple sclerosis was present and should come forward to be healed. Sue made her way down from the balcony in her handicapped scooter. Father DiOrio laid hands on her and prayed, then told her to get up out of her scooter.

Sue did as she was told but was not impressed. She had still been able to walk but used the scooter because she tired quickly. However, that night she had a dream in which she was flying like Lois Lane in the Superman movie. Only instead of Superman holding her hand, it was Jesus. He told her to let go, but she was afraid she would fall. Jesus assured her she would not. So she let go and continued flying on her own. Sue took this as a sign she should leave her scooter at home when she returned to work the next morning. That was when I encountered her by the elevator.

Sue gained strength swiftly in the days and weeks that followed. Soon there were no traces of her former disability. The reactions of her co-workers were telling. Some

regarded her recovery as a miracle. Others struggled to find another explanation. Perhaps there had been some sort of spontaneous remission. Perhaps her affliction had been psychosomatic. My boss muttered darkly that she could do herself serious harm walking around like that.

Then, a few months later, Sue was offered a better job at another company. This meant she would have to pass a physical in order to be hired. She told the doctor that she had once had MS but had been healed. After some tests, the doctor could find nothing wrong with her, and she landed the job.

The question of faith looms large in many of the biblical healing stories. "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" Jesus asks two blind men before restoring their sight. The father of a boy possessed by a demon is rebuked even for wondering whether there was anything Jesus could do for his son. "All things are possible to him who believes," Jesus says sternly. "I believe," cries the desperate father, "help my unbelief!"

What then are we to make of my colleague Sue, who had no faith in miracles and only attended Father DiOrio's healing service to stop her mother's nagging? Perhaps it was her mother's faith that made her well – but wait, there is more to the story. After Sue left for her new job I did not see her again until some years later, when I happened to run into her at the mall. I was saddened to see she was once again getting around in a handicapped scooter. This time I restrained the impulse to blurt out, "What happened to you?"

But, of course, I couldn't help wondering. I remembered all my co-workers struggling for some rational explanation of Sue's apparent healing. Now the shoe was on the other foot. I think we have to rule out lack of faith here, since that was no impediment to her being healed in the first place. Perhaps there had been a spontaneous remission after all, which happens in MS cases. The timing was certainly unusual. And a spontaneous remission would not explain how she subsequently received a clean bill of health at her employment physical. Fundamentalists might conclude that Sue must have sinned – a standard explanation for affliction in Jesus' day. By that standard, of course, no one would ever be healed of anything.

I have no explanation for why Sue suffered a relapse after she was apparently healed, much less why she got sick in the first place. We torture ourselves with explanations sometimes, still more with the lack of them. We make excuses with them or resort to them as a way of lying to ourselves. We use them to tidy up. We invoke them when confronted by some circumstance that defies our expectations. Too often our explanations are a palliative against the mystery of life as it actually unfolds.

No doubt it would have made for a tidier sermon if I hadn't run into Sue at the mall. But thanks to the Internet, I know something of how the story ends. I found Sue's obituary. She lived to be 66, 30-odd years beyond the events described here. She retired from her new job in 1987, a decade or so beyond the time she would have had to go on disability from my company. Can her experience be described as a healing miracle? I

say yes, but not in the way we expect. Her healing was that she received the gift of time.

#