

In the name of the one God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

In today's gospel, we heard Matthew tell us about two of the miracles that Jesus had performed. In the first, he wrote, "A woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, 'If only I touch his cloak, I will be made well.' Jesus turned, and seeing her said, 'Take heart daughter; your faith has made you well.' And instantly the woman was made well." And, in the second: "A leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him," and said, "My daughter has just died; but, come and lay your hand on her and she will live." Jesus went to the leader's house and told the mourners to go away. "He went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up."

The four gospels are filled with Jesus' miracle stories. He cures fevers and leprosy. He straightens a withered hand and a bent back. With his touch, blindness and deafness disappear. He performs exorcisms, and he raises people from the dead. These accounts of the miracles that Jesus performed were originally recounted as oral histories. These stories were told and re-told many times in the 30 to 40 years after Jesus' death. These are stories that are retold by many different people, in several different languages, and in a variety of countries throughout the Roman Empire.

The first written account of the miracle stories appears in Mark's gospel which, I understand, was written in about 65 A.D., almost 40 years after Christ's crucifixion. The gospels of Matthew and Luke and the Book of Acts followed sometime between 80 and 85 AD and each are filled with their own interpretations of Jesus' ministry. The gospel of John wasn't written until about 90 AD. Each of the gospels tells the miracle stories in slightly different ways, just as they tell us of the

years of Jesus' public ministry in different ways. It seems to me that it would be very strange if the occurrences written in the gospels were all alike. It reminds me the old camp game where everyone sits in a circle and the first person whispers a phrase to the next person who then passes it on to the next until it goes all the way around to circle. The phrase rarely sounds anything like the original when it finishes. It's not surprising that there are differences in the gospel stories given the many versions of Jesus' ministry that were told, both orally and in written form, between Jesus' death and the time that the various gospels were written.

I think that it's important to understand that the gospels didn't pretend to be historically accurate. I've read that, at the time that they were written, historical accuracy was not considered to be important. Rather, the gospels reflect the deep faith that the early church had in Jesus, who had the power to heal, to feed, and to comfort. For instance, in Luke's gospel, Jesus begins his public ministry by reciting the words of Isaiah 4, verses 18-19, "The Spirit of the Lord has chosen me to bring good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to captives, give sight to the blind, and set the oppressed free." In this statement, as in many others that Jesus made, we see that historical accuracy is of little relevance. What's important is the message of God's love for the poor and the oppressed that emerges as the central and universal theme. The whole of Jesus' ministry, as described in each of the gospels, challenges people to a new vision of a liberating, loving God who sides with the poor, the hungry, the sick and the suffering.

I've read that theologian Dr. Gerald Hall says this so well in his lecture "Jesus' Parables and Miracles in the Gospels." He says that, "There is nothing to suggest that Jesus performs miracles to bring attention to himself. When events are proclaimed miraculous, they are,

from Jesus' own perspective, nothing more and nothing less than indications that God's healing, saving, and redeeming power is not merely a reality of the past and future, but something available to people in the here and now." Dr. Hall goes on to say, "Miracles are central to Jesus' ministry on behalf of God's kingdom. Their purpose is not to divinize Jesus, but to reveal the power of God's love at work in unexpected ways. They call people to a conversion of heart, vision and action so that they too will become signs of God's dynamic reign of a fully inclusive, healing, liberating community. The miracle stories subvert our ordinary way of seeing the world and invite us to be vulnerable so that the miracle of God's love will be experienced even now among us."

This message that tells us about God's reign will be experienced by us and is central to our understanding of our role as Christians. It's also central to the way in which we understand our role in the wider world. In our Baptismal Covenant, we promise, "To proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ; to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves, and to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being." We make each of these individual promises and answer with the reply, "I will with God's help."

The religious sceptics may try to throw the baby out with the bath water when they point out that the gospels aren't historically accurate. However, the miracle stories tell us of Jesus' powerful relationship with God and His great compassion. Jesus often healed with words and touch. Through our baptismal covenant, we have our own powerful relationship with God. This relationship promises to proclaim the good news, to seek and serve Christ in all people and to strive for justice, peace and dignity among all people. How does our relationship with God

enable us to be a compassionate, healing presence for people today? How do our collective strengths and talents enable us to become partners in the ever-growing community of partnerships to make the world a better place for all of God's children? How do we fulfill our Baptismal Covenant?

I would like to close with a quote by Mother Teresa of Calcutta - one of the great healers of modern times. She said, "We try to pray through our work by doing it with Jesus, for Jesus, to Jesus. That helps us put our whole heart and soul into doing it. The dying, the crippled, the mentally ill, the unwanted, the unloved - they are Jesus in disguise."

Thanks be to God's love for all of God's children and Amen.