

Luke 8:26-39
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“Miracles, Mystery and Us”

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In the late 1990's it was the image of Mother Mary believed to be imprinted on the side of a home finance building in Clearwater, FL. In 1977, someone thought they saw the face of Jesus in a skillet, outlined by burn marks left from heating a tortilla. In 1996 at Bongo Café in Nashville, TN someone thought they saw Mother Teresa's image in a cinnamon bun. In 2004, someone sold a 10 year old grilled cheese sandwich on Ebay for \$28,000, because the buyer was convinced there was an image of the Virgin Mary imprinted on the sandwich.

This is called Pareidolia. It is a type of illusion or misperception involving a vague or obscure image or sound which is then perceived as something clear and distinct. Philosopher David Hume tells us this is what is happening when we think we see a man on the moon or a cartoon characters in the clouds.

Many years ago when visiting Clearwater, a friend took me to the building which was no longer a finance building but a church, with a shrine by the wall in question. For a small fee you could enter the shrine and sit down to gaze or pray by the wall. For another small fee you could light a candle in front of the wall in memory or honor of someone. We took a glimpse from the parking lot and saved our “small fees.” To tell you the truth, I did not see the image.

But these and other experiences point to the human hunger for mystery and miracle. We want tangible proof of God. If we look at the story from Luke's gospel today, after the swine herders went into the city to tell the others about the healing, we read, “People came out to see what had happened.” The miracle hungry crowd came to Jesus and found the man from whom legions had gone, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.”

At this point the crowd has a decision. They can look on the “miracle” of this event, find themselves deeply amazed that this man who they thought was beyond any sort of help, was healed, and go home feeling their faith strengthened by the miracle they have seen. More confident than ever that God is powerful and good. Or they can do something to improve conditions and make sure people who need real help can get it.

This past week many of us were invited to numerous prayer vigils following another mass shooting, this one in Orlando. But I started wondering, what happens when I go to a vigil for next week's tragedy, or the one after that. I understand the human need for solidarity following tragedy, strength in numbers and so on, but what do we do with the combined strength gathered at these vigils? A week later there is another shooting, another vigil to attend, more prayers to be said, and we repeat the cycle. When does attending vigils become just another part time job for concerned Christians?

God is calling us to use our strength in numbers to do something. Instead of our country erupting into a debate over mental health and gun control laws, God is calling us to make a difference.

If people ARE falling through the cracks of our mental health systems, what can concerned citizens do to strengthen these systems? If gun laws and background checks are too relaxed, and people can legally get ahold of the same weapons soldiers used in Vietnam, then what can concerned citizens do to help pass more reasonable gun reforms? Albert Einstein defined Insanity as, "Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

So the crowd that has rushed out to see this miraculous healing has a choice, they can go home feeling amazed that God can overcome the impossible, heal the unhealable, and be so grateful that they belong to a miracle performing God. Or, they can make a difference.

In Luke's story we see the townsfolk ready to run to the miracles but where were these folks when this guy really needed help, or protection, or assistance, or treatment? If it takes a village, where was the village for this man? Had the community pushed this man to the margins... with local business owners telling him he was banned from their business? Had governments cut funding for programs that could help him? Did people hurry by him on the street? Had the churches said, "God is not speaking to you?" Had the people of city learned to treat him as invisible? It's a question of how we shape Christian community.

Toward the beginning of the 12th chapter of I Corinthians, Paul writes to the followers of Jesus, "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." Then he goes into a long explanation of how the ear needs the eye, and the body needs the foot, and so on. He continues about how the members of the body we think are weaker, Christians are to treat as indispensable, the ones we think are less honorable, we clothe with greater honor, the less respectable we treat with greater respect... and we quickly realize Paul is not talking about physical bodies, instead he is giving us a spiritual blueprint, a "how to" for building Christian community.

Then he ends that chapter inviting Christ's disciples to a "Still more excellent way," saying, "For now you are the body of Christ..." Paul links us to each other, friend, neighbor, family member, stranger, traveler, poor, rich, male, female, child, adult etc.

The healing of this man shows us God is mighty beyond our expectations, God heals beyond our medical and scientific explanation, yet in a secondary sort of way, the story reveals that we too can be mighty beyond our expectations. It takes some work to build faithful community. But after a national tragedy we hope life becomes ever more precious to us. We hope compassion grows toward new and different people with whom we are willing to become allies. We hope God's miracle gives us strength to go out and make a difference in our world.

See one of the old adages about prayer, it applies to prayer vigils too, is "prayer doesn't tell God what to do, Prayer changes us!" How have you been changed as you pray with those facing

tragedy in Orlando? We know God is already at work there, we hear of the marine veteran who served in Afghanistan who saved dozens of lives in the Orlando shooting by jumping over a latched door and opening it so dozens of club goers could get out alive.

That is God at work, how might we be inspired and empowered to work in our community, with our vote, with our voice, with our pen, with our organizing skills, with our connections... how might we make a difference to reduce or prevent this kind of violence here, what we do, the vision of peace we work toward, can become another of God's miracles working through us.

Amen