

The next miracle

The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C - February 17, 2019

The Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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Jesus came down with the twelve apostles, and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. Then he looked up at his disciples and said: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets. Luke 6:17-26

You and I have witnessed quite a few miracles since the New Year.

It began with those magi, coming from the East, following that star.

The next week: the divine voice from heaven at the baptism of Jesus.

Then the water turned to exceptionally good wine at a wedding.

And last Sunday, at the bidding of Jesus, some fishermen catching so many fish that two boats-full began to sink.

The miracles continue at the opening of today's gospel scene. " ... a great crowd ... had come to hear [Jesus] and to be healed of their diseases ... all ... were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them."

But this morning's text is not mainly about those miracles. We quickly move to the opening lines of a sermon in which Jesus exposes and comments on the heart of our human condition.

We're told in the very first moments of this passage that "*Jesus came down with the twelve apostles, and stood on a level place ...*" I prefer the King James and other translations that say Jesus came down and stood on a *plain*. Just in the past two weeks I learned that Illinois is the second-flattest state in the nation, second to Florida. All of us who live in Illinois know what's meant by a *plain*! Bible commentators and preachers have traditionally called this text 'The Sermon on the Plain,' often comparing and contrasting it with Matthew's 'Sermon on the Mount.'

Our English word plain also suggests other meanings. Think of what we mean when we say someone *speaks plainly* or is *plainspoken*. We mean that they are direct, clear, as Jesus intends to be in what follows. Or think of what we mean when we ask, "*Should I wear the fancy outfit or the plain one?*" In this sense, plain means ordinary, everyday, unembellished. In the sermon he begins today, Jesus will leave the miracles behind for a bit as he addresses the plain truth about the 'real world' where most of us live most of our lives most of the time.

"Blessed are you who are poor ...

"Blessed are you who are hungry now ...

"Blessed are you who weep now ...

"But woe to you who are rich ...

"Woe to you who are full now ...

"Woe to you who are laughing now ...

You may have heard the saying that the mission of preaching is, or should be, to *'comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable,'* and Jesus is plainly setting the pace for that standard here. He wades right into what we value, what unites or divides us, who we imagine 'our people' to be, how we imagine God condemns or endorses *us* or *them*, comforts or afflicts *us* or *them*.

This sermon of Jesus continues past what we heard this morning. It takes up all of chapter 6 in Luke's gospel. We don't hear anything about how anyone responded to this sermon of Jesus. This catches my attention as a preacher because I typically *do* hear more responses than normal on occasions when I try to connect the gospel to issues that either comfort or afflict us in our own time. *"That was a great sermon!"* someone will say, if my message corresponds to their own views on a matter. Then, just as I'm feeling smug, another hearer comes along and in response to the same sermon asks, *"Why do you have to get political the pulpit?"* And there's a good caution there. We preachers should not be too absolutely sure about what exact candidate or public policy God favors.

On the other hand, following the example of Jesus, sometimes the faithful preacher must urge us to grab our faith lens and rigorously look at matters that are uncomfortable and controversial. All preachers should bear in mind the last line of today's gospel: *"Woe to you when all speak well of you ..."* Jesus goes on to reference the *'false prophets'* of old, those who only ever told comfortable people what they wanted to hear, those whose sermons were cotton candy -- sweet with no substance -- avoiding controversy for the sake of self-preservation. Jesus implicit condemnation of the false prophets remind me of a quote that I've heard attributed to the martyred and recently beatified Salvadoran bishop Oscar Romero: *"The prayer of most of the world's leaders is, 'Our Father, who art in heaven, please stay there ...'"*

I can't remember where I recently heard or overheard someone say: *"Jesus was not a Republican! And Jesus was not a Democrat! But Jesus was political."* If politics is concerned with the distribution of and exercise of power, with who is afflicted and who is comfortable and under what circumstances and due to what assumptions and precedents and from what motives and why -- well, in his sermon this morning Jesus seems intent on wading right into all of that and more. At some point those of us who believe we are following him must figure out how to follow him *there*, or *here*, right into the sticky mess of being human and being human together.

By way of illustration, this may be the right moment for me to mention my gratitude for Father Rich Daly, and his wife Diana, here with us for the last time this morning before making a big move to Texas in the coming weeks. In my contacts and conversations with Father Daly over the past few years, I've been intrigued by and grateful for his dual vocation as a priest and as a police officer *and* for his ongoing graduate studies in pastoral care, focusing on crisis intervention and addictions recovery. All of these commitments have given him a front row seat to view the whole complexity of the human condition, all of our folly, all of our glory.

But as Father Daly and Officer Daly both know, to be genuinely faithful one must get out of one's front row seat. One must stand up, wade into trouble and controversy, love and hate, poverty and wealth, weeping and laughing -- to look in all places for light, to seek to be the light. Whether one's light is seen and appreciated or covered up, whether one's actions make any apparent difference, we keep Jesus alive in the world by fully taking part in it as he did.

As Jesus begins his sermon on the plain today, he seems for the moment to have left behind the miracles. But maybe not. Maybe Jesus knows that some of the most amazing miracles take place quietly, at first invisibly, in the human heart. That moment we saw everything in a new light. That insight that led to compunction and genuine forgiveness. The courage we find to get out of our front row seats and plainly address a problem that no one else will touch.

Some of the most genuine miracles don't always look like miracles. They are works of love or justice that mainly look to most of us like loyalty and perseverance and hard work and humility. Maybe as Jesus is preaching this morning he is imagining that you and I will be the next miracle.