

sermon-6/6/10 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Everyday Miracles”
Luke 7:11-17

Here we are after fifty years of Newport’s existence, in worship, pondering the scriptures given to us by the lectionary as we have done countless times down through the years. Worship is the heart of our existence as a church. It is why the founding members built the sanctuary first. Everything else comes as a result of worship.

The lectionary has actually cooperated with this moment in our history. It has given us a very appropriate and useful text to ponder on this Sunday of our 50th anniversary. It comes to us in the seventh chapter of Luke’s gospel.

We encounter two miracle stories in chapter seven. The first comes right before our text for today. It is the story of Jesus healing the centurion’s slave in Capernaum. It is an amazing story on many levels.

First, Jesus was compassionate to an enemy soldier, one who represented the occupying power in Israel. It gets even more surprising. This centurion is concerned about his slave. He is so concerned he humbles himself before an itinerant teacher. It ends with Jesus commending this enemy soldier as having more faith than all the good religious people of his country.

You can imagine how this sounded to the first readers of Luke. What is going on here? Luke wants us to realize God works outside the box of what most of us would see as expected. God is not going to be confined by our expectations.

The next story, our text for today, is even more outside the box. It is the story of the resuscitation of a corpse. Luke makes a point of saying Jesus meets this funeral procession outside the town’s gates. He wants to give us a picture of God working outside the safe confines of what we find comfortable, what we call home.

There are amazing details in this miracle story. Note there is no cry for help from the mother or those in the procession. As one commentator notes, God, in Christ, “meets our need even when we are too torn apart to ask for help.” This woman is devastated. She cannot see beyond her own despair to even ask for help.

Note, as well, there is no profession of faith in this story. Unlike the centurion in the previous verses, those who are helped do not say a word. This is a miracle of utter grace. It comes about outside the box of what any reasonable person could expect. Who would believe a corpse could sit up and talk? Jesus even goes outside the box of accepted purity laws by touching the bier where the corpse lay. No good Jewish man would ever think to do this. This is so shocking that those carrying the corpse stop in their tracks.

The point of this miracle story is that no situation can be so dismal that God can’t bring new life. The son was dead. You can’t get any more dismal than that. But, there is

another dismal situation going on here. The mother in this story was as good as dead. She is a widow. Her only protection and means of support after her husband died, was her son. In that culture a woman needed a man to survive. Now her only son is dead. She was in deep trouble. Luke, as one scholar put it, wants us to see that God is at work even in the most deadly, impossible situations. Nothing is beyond God's healing presence.

What are we to do with these miracle stories? We could be cynical. Raising someone from the dead simply does not fit our 21st century scientific box of what we deem possible. How can we believe this and still consider ourselves an educated, sophisticated person? To believe raises all kinds of questions concerning why does God not raise others from the dead? We all could name someone we would wish experienced that miracle.

Or we could be humble and just stand in awe, pondering what Luke wants us to see and experience. Luke says the bystanders were seized with fear. Perhaps a better word would be awe. The NRSV defines awe here as the "recognition of the limits of human understandings and power before God."

Cynicism or awe. Those are our choices. The latter response, recognizing God is bigger than the little boxes we construct as to what is possible, suspending our rational approach to see the deeper meaning in the story, leads to a very different way of living out the life of faith.

I talked with the former Heads of Staff here at Newport and asked them to think back over their time at Newport and see if they could remember any times when what seemed impossible became possible. Where did they see or experience little everyday miracles in their ministry here? Here is what I heard, not only from them but others.

When David Meekhof started this new church development he was not given a core group to help start it. He was on his own walking the community around Newport Hills asking people to come to worship. It did not look promising. I would find that almost an impossible task. Look at what Newport has become from those humble beginnings.

David said when the membership started their first building program the hope was for a sanctuary in the round. The first plans from the architect came back too expensive. He said he was very discouraged. But a new design was created that still captured the theology of Newport. The footprint of this space has not changed in fifty years. It has been a wonderful space for people to experience God.

David Yeaworth talked about Newport's ministry to a clan of Southeast Asian refugees in the mid 1970's. He said Newport was a bit nervous taking on this mission project with folks from a very different culture. We thought we were dealing with just one family, but ended up helping 27 or 28 people from 3 different generations. This set loose a great spike of energy in the congregation.

A committee was formed. They helped with housing, food, education and even offered English as a second language classes. David said Dot Gregoire was one of the teachers. In one class she wanted to see if the students were actually getting it. She all of a sudden just said, "Please stand up now." David said when he saw several in the class understood what she was saying and stood up, it felt like a mini-miracle!

Dennis Hughes sent me several stories this week from a plane as he was flying to Louisville on Presbyterian business. The one that really touched me concerns Greg Bobgan, the Associate Pastor while Dennis was here. Greg's wife had a very good friend who moved to the Eastside around the time she and Greg moved to Newport. Early on Greg baptized his two little boys and the other couple's three little boys. One of those boys was Kevin. Within two years little Kevin was dying, having shunt after shunt put into his brain. At the same time Greg's marriage fell apart when he learned his wife had not been faithful to him. It was a very dark time. I am going to let Dennis tell the rest in his words.

"Greg, broken every which way, asked me if he could preside at the funeral, and I said of course he could. So at the service he read scripture and then went not to the pulpit but to the font to preach. He recalled the service of baptism, and how he had taken little Kevin in his arms and then reached down and dipped water in his hand and placed water on Kevin's little head, that head that had endured such horrible insults in recent months, and had said: 'Kevin, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.' And then I dipped my thumb in oil and traced the sign of the Cross on Kevin's forehead and I said, 'Kevin, child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.' When Greg stopped there wasn't a dry eye in the place, but everyone agreed with me afterward that we practically 'levitated' out the door, having witnessed the power of the Gospel and the liturgy to heal our grief in a way we had never imagined possible." Another miracle in Newport's history.

Gary Schwab tells the story of when Bob and Jeaneane Hill's son Troy came out as gay and this church formed a support group around them. Many would say Jeaneane could be very forthright in her feelings about inclusiveness, but this has led Newport into being a place where all feel welcome, no matter what their sexual orientation. What may have seemed impossible to some, has now become not even an issue for so many.

My six years here (and I can't believe it has already been six years) has seen many things that I would call little everyday miracles, many of which you already know. I could name the latest \$2.1 million remodeling project that seemed absolutely out of our reach. But we, with God's help, stepped to the plate. The balanced budget this year in the face of the recession and financial turmoil is its own little miracle. The staff turnover we have experienced in the last two plus years, saying goodbye to beloved staff members who I thought would be very hard to replace was a potential dark time. But we have thrived in the midst of that turnover.

All of those are important. Some seem to fall more into the miracle category than others. But, for me, the most important "miracles" surround those times when I have seen people

in this church die with courage and grace; or people change their minds about long held beliefs and theology, letting go of ideas they have held from childhood.

Perhaps the most amazing miracle that spans the fifty years of our existence is the fact we have remained a theologically progressive church and survived in a very theologically conservative Presbytery. We have gone through five heads of staff, all quite different in personality and style, but all on the same page theologically keeping Newport an inclusive community where all are welcome regardless of race, sexual orientation, or other things that might divide us.

Folks at Newport have shown a deep respect for people of other religions, inviting them to help us learn from them and even sharing the pulpit with a Muslim brother and praying together in worship with our Bahai friends. We have gone through discussions where there was no consensus. Instead of people walking away angry, they agreed to disagree and live together because of their unity in Christ.

So, we welcome the future confident God will be with us. We will thrive if we are humble enough to realize God often works outside our little boxes and if we accept God is always beyond the limits of our understandings and power. May it be so. Amen