

## ***Laws of Nature, God's and Ours***

Luke 7:11-17

June 10, 2007

### **I.**

Today's Gospel tells us about another of Jesus' miracles. This time he and the disciples came across the funeral of a young man who left a surviving mother, who also was a widow.

In first century Jewish society this was a serious problem for the widow because with the death of her only son she had no one left to support her or care for her. The hope then, as it is today, was that children would bury their parents, not the other way around. Jesus had compassion for her, and restored the man to life.

When I read stories about funerals, and remembering that even though I am now a priest, I also spent many years as a lawyer and had some doctors as clients. Sometimes this reminds me of the story about the preacher, the doctor, and the lawyer.

It seems these three people were close friends of a wealthy man with a terminal illness. The wealthy man called them together and gave each of them an envelope with fifty thousand dollars in cash, and told them that when they came for the viewing after he died he wanted each of them to drop the envelope and cash in his casket. He literally wanted to take it with him.

The three friends thought the request was a little strange, but it was his money and his last request, and so they agreed. Well, the fellow soon passed on, there was the viewing, and his three friends came by and dropped their envelopes in his casket.

Several weeks later, they all happened to be together, and the preacher said, "you know, I really feel guilty. We're building an addition to the church and we needed twenty thousand dollars to finish our building campaign. So I took part of that money and used it for the church, and the people thought a miracle had happened. But there was only thirty thousand dollars left in the envelope.

The doctor said he also felt a little guilty. He said he was building a new clinic to help people who could not afford health care, and he also took twenty thousand to buy equipment for this worthwhile project. The people at the clinic also thought a miracle had happened, but his envelope also contained only thirty thousand dollars.

Well, the lawyer just shook his head. He said, "I'm really surprised at you two, and what you did. I thought you had more integrity. I'll have you know that I put in a check for the full amount."

So the moral of this story is that sometimes funerals produce real miracles, like in today's Gospel, and at other times the things we might think are miracles really are something else.

Now, at this point I could analyze today's Gospel reading in detail, and point out some interesting features such as how no one asked Jesus to restore the son's life, and that we don't even know if the widow and son were believers or even good people or not. I'm not going to do that, and instead would like to look at the larger picture concerning miracles.

I would like us to think about miracles generally, what they are, what they mean, and whether we still experience miracles today.

### **II.**

In the context of history, Jews in first century Palestine easily could accept the idea of miracles. They were living under the oppression of Roman domination with no hope of changing

anything on their own. They were psychologically and spiritually prepared to believe that God could intervene in their lives to make things better, and that God also could send prophets and messiahs to do miracles of hope. Indeed, under the circumstances, God was their only hope.

The stories of biblical miracles remained credible for centuries until the period of the Age of the Enlightenment, an eighteenth century movement in European and American philosophy also called the Age of Reason. That was a time when all things were thought to be explainable by reason, science, and the laws of nature. If something could not be understood in that way it was rejected as not believable.

You can imagine how people of that time must have changed their ideas about biblical miracles. The classic objection perhaps was stated by the Scottish philosopher, David Hume, who basically said that miracles could not exist because they were violations of the laws of nature. He obviously ignored the possibility that some miracles could be events in which God controlled the forces of nature.

And today, in the postmodern era, there is virtually no philosophy left unspoken. Some people focus entirely on the secular world, while others seek a deepening of their spirituality. We see various types of New Age philosophy that promote false ideas of miracles and the supernatural, but there also is a greater recognition that God really is at work in our lives.

But even among people today who believe that the miracles described in the Bible actually happened, and that we still experience miracles today, we find different reasons for these beliefs. For me, the differences have theological and spiritual importance because they reveal how we understand God.

One common understanding is that miracles are supernatural events. In this sense we would look at miracles from our own limited perspective. We would treat miracles as existing and occurring outside of the laws of nature. We would believe that they operate at an entirely different level from anything with which we are familiar in the world. This view of miracles might regard them as extraordinary or beyond creation as we know it.

When we look at miracles in this way we consider them as mysteries that we accept through faith, and we do not try to understand them or to place them in any type of rational structure.

Another view, however, is that the world is not a closed system of the laws of nature that are disrupted when miracles occur. Rather, we look at it from God's perspective. We accept that the world operates as it does because that is the way that God created it, and when miracles happen it is merely God choosing that his creation will operate in a different way at that particular time and place.

In this sense miracles are not mysteries or violations of the laws of nature, but instead are examples of how nature works in accordance with God's will; not our limited human understanding. Miracles can be examples of the way creation actually is, and they are entirely consistent with the idea that God continues to create in the world.

There are valid points in both approaches, although the first contains a danger to be avoided, in my view. And that is the notion that God is merely a "God of the gaps." This idea suggests that God is a supernatural force in those things that we cannot understand, but the danger is that it ignores God in those things that function normally within our everyday lives.

I believe we cannot limit God to that which is in our ignorance. We cannot restrict God's presence, power, and activity to only those things that are extraordinary or not otherwise explainable. Through the centuries humanity has eliminated many of the gaps in science. Does that mean that God's presence also is reduced?

I do not believe so. God is everywhere in creation, and always has been. You can look through this window behind me and see the trees shimmering with God's presence. When miracles occur they are examples of God's presence in creation. And we are invited to participate in that divine life that already is right here among us in all that we do, but that is another sermon.

### **III.**

So, back to miracles and what they mean and whether we experience miracles today. I believe we do. Today, unlike the first century, Jesus is not physically present and so the connection between miracles and the divine life might not be as obvious to us as it was, for example, to the people described in today's Gospel reading.

But yet, we all have seen them. Several years ago a close friend of ours was diagnosed with a slow growing form of cancer that the doctors said would eventually take his life. On a Friday night Susan and I, and this fellow and his wife, went to a healing service where the celebrant laid hands on him and anointed him. The following week he had a medical examination with no sign of the cancer. Five years later it still is gone. Was it a miracle? I think it was.

And even apart from miraculous healings, or apart from unexplainable improvements in medical conditions, we see God at work in our everyday lives.

What about the person driving down the street approaching an intersection and a dog runs out in front of the vehicle? The driver puts on the brakes to slow down, only to look up and see a large truck coming from the side run the red light and flash through the intersection. If that dog had not been there the driver would not have slowed down and would have been in the intersection when the truck came through.

Did God through his ministering angels put the dog there at that time? I can believe miracles operate in that way today. And we all probably have experienced things like that. They may not be miracles in the biblical sense, but they certainly are examples of God being involved in our lives to show us that life is not just a series of random chances. And isn't that also what we mean by miracles? Doesn't it show that God is everywhere, and not just in the gaps?

One final point should be made. How do we deal with the inconsistency between the idea that with God all things are possible, and yet sometimes the miracles we most earnestly desire do not happen? Why are some people healed and others are not?

In some ways miracles, especially healing miracles, show us what God's kingdom will be like when it comes. They are visions of the inbreaking of the kingdom; previews of coming attractions, so to speak. But the previews are not the entire movie. It has not yet been released.

We could ask ourselves, what if God did intercede and eliminate every danger, every bad situation, and every sickness in the world? What would that mean? Well, one thing it would mean is that the kingdom already fully is here, and we know that has not yet happened.

So, we draw our hope not only from our faith but also from what we call miracles, which are the ways in which God intervenes in our lives to carry out his will. And in my view, these interventions are not mysterious or contrary to the laws of nature, but rather are the laws of nature as enacted by God even though they might not be understood by us.

### **IV.**

So here we are, with a Gospel reading about one of Jesus' miracles, and hopefully an understanding of how those miracles point beyond Jesus' time and hold out hope for us today. What do we do next?

Perhaps the central point to grasp is that we are in God's hands but we can participate in the beauty of creation that has been given to us, including all of the miracles that are part of it even though they are beyond our full understanding.

This is why we pray. It is why we have faith. It is why we come to church on Sunday or to our healing service on Wednesday. It is why believe that we are loved by God our creator, redeemed by Jesus Christ our savior, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit who guides us. Through this faith we, like the people of biblical times, share in the miracles that surround us every day. *Amen.*