
I Believe

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Proper 25 – Year B

Many of us modern, enlightened Christians have complicated histories with the Bible's miracle stories, and especially with its miraculous healing stories. As for me, as a child, I had no trouble taking them at face value. It made perfect sense to me that Jesus could walk on water and multiply loaves and heal people with his spit or his hands or his words. I was quick to ask for miracles of my own, too. Some I got; some I didn't. But that didn't stop me from praying for them and believing they were possible.

Then, as I got older, and as I became more "reasonable" and my world less enchanted, less filled with supernatural possibility—and as I saw so many more serious prayers for miracles go seemingly unanswered—I started to dismiss these stories as simplistic and impossible. At least, until I discovered that there could be scientific explanations for some of them; and others, I could interpret figuratively! They weren't about literal or physical healings, but spiritual or emotional or metaphorical ones. These interpretations seemed much safer, much more culturally acceptable. They demanded much less of me and expected much less of God.

And this was fine, until about ten years ago, when I let down my guard, and let go of all that reasonableness and caution, and prayed for an outright miracle. On my daughter's fourth birthday, we had surprised her with a puppy—a terrier-Chihuahua mix, who looked like a miniature boxer. Her name was Lucy. She was a hyper dog who wore us out, but she had this adorable habit of curling up on your shoulder and falling asleep.

Then, one afternoon, as kids were streaming in and out of my house, she dashed out the front door and was hit by a car, in front of all the kids. I scooped her up, and my husband drove us to the animal hospital. By the time we got there, it was clear she wasn't going to make it.

And I prayed, in all the wrong ways. I begged for a miracle, and let myself believe it was possible; I challenged God to show up and show out; I offered God a deal. It was perhaps the most vulnerable prayer I've ever prayed, because I meant it, though I also knew in my head that it was unreasonable and impossible—and I didn't know if my faith could survive another big fat "no."

Lucy didn't make it, and I was heartbroken. But something happened there, anyway. In that moment, it wasn't about saying or thinking or doing the most theologically proper thing; and it wasn't about protecting God from unrealistic expectations, or protecting myself from disappointment or embarrassment. For that moment, I went all in on God and dared to hope, in a way I hadn't for a really long time.

This might be the closest I've come to the kind of faith we see in our Gospel today.

Bartimaeus is a blind beggar, camped out on the side of the road on the edge of Jericho. When he hears that Jesus is going by, he shouts out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" He doesn't care if he's approaching Jesus in the right way, or how he looks, or what people will think. Which is a good thing, because they think he's all wrong and try to silence him.

But he doesn't listen. He believes that Jesus can and will help him, and he persists. He shouts out again, even more loudly.

Jesus stops and calls for him. And the very people who had just been shushing him tell him to take heart, and get up, because Jesus is calling him.

So he throws off his cloak, probably his only protection and valuable possession, and jumps up and runs to Jesus. When Jesus asks him what he wants Jesus to do for him, he tells the truth, the bottom-of-his-heart truth: “My teacher,” he says, “*my* teacher, let me see again.” Jesus answers, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately, Bartimaeus regains his sight and follows Jesus, thus becoming a model of faith—an example to all those other disciples who keep not getting it, who have eyes but don’t see.

And just what *does* he show them, and *us*, about faith? We aren’t told anything about his spiritual practices or his views on theological issues or his attendance at church. All we know is what he does when Jesus walks by: He takes a leap of faith and believes in this guy, whom he’s only heard about. He trusts Jesus, and acts on that trust. He insists on being heard, and persists in hope, and stays open to the possibility that Jesus can do anything.

Contemporary, enlightened, learned Christians may feel like they’ve outgrown this kind of faith, and may even take pride in that fact. They may consider this kind of faith naïve, simplistic, immature—a thing of the past.

But I’m coming to see that the opposite is true: that spiritual growth for many of us, myself included, means learning to trust Jesus all over again, simply and unreservedly. It means trusting God enough to imagine and hope again and to surrender to mystery: not disregarding all that we’ve learned and experienced, but integrating all of it into our faith. It means letting ourselves pray from the bottom of our hearts, and persisting when others write us off. It means loving God with our whole selves and living and acting like people who take God seriously, not just as an idea, but as an active and living and powerful force in the world and in our lives.