

DARNED MIRACLES

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John 5: 1 – 9

May 9, 2010

Confirmation Sunday

Remember that first Wednesday evening back in September? School had just started and you were trying to figure out what it means to be in high school. And to complicate your life more, there you were on a Wednesday evening in church for something called Confirmation.

That was the first of the Wednesday evenings together, with a different question for discussion each week – 30 questions for 30 weeks.

There were questions about adolescence and finding your way through the complicated passageway from childhood to being an adult.

There were questions about life in this new world in which everything moves faster and is interconnected, wired, global, and more competitive.

There were questions about morality and ethics; about finding your inner compass in a culture so dominated by the values of self-centeredness, consumption, appearance, immediate gratification.

Then there were questions about spirituality, sexuality, prayer, justice, fear, forgiveness, the good and bad things that happen to people.

And there was the God-question. Who, what, where, is God? And the role religion plays. How does good religion become destructive religion? Why is religion becoming more important all across the globe?

And then there was the question of Jesus. Who was he really? Why was his life so powerful and threatening? And what might it mean still to live the kind of radical love he taught and modeled and died for?

And did he actually do those miracles? Literally make impossible things happen. Is there a way for us rational, enlightened persons, to read those stories in a deeper way?

Like with the story today, of the guy who was sick so long that he could no longer stand up on his own. Someone who cared apparently carried him to the healing pool everyday. But the man didn't even try to get in the water. I guess he had come to believe that it didn't matter, that even if he got into the pool and the waters helped, what difference would it make?

Even if an angel stirred the water when he got in, all the problems of the world would still be there when he got out. In places of war and hatred, the killing will go on. The huge oil spill will still destroy all that it's going to destroy. The hungry of the world will still be hungry. Haiti still won't have enough tents for the rainy season. Society will still decide to spend more money on weapon systems than school systems.

Nothing is going to change, so it doesn't matter what I do or don't do, the man by the pool had apparently decided.

So might this really be a story about the loss of hope? About what happens when people no longer believe that things can change, or that one can make a difference somehow, or that your life matters in some larger scheme.

People who lose hope just go through the motions of living, or they become bitter, self-centered, and cynical about everything. The loss of hope can cripple.

And it's easy to lose hope – isn't it? The world can beat the hope right out of us. The bad news in the world is relentless. The issues affecting the future – war and peace, wealth and poverty, refugees and immigration, ecology and climate change, – these issues can seem beyond any solutions. And that can paralyze and cripple one's soul.

And in our own lives, people we love have terrible things happen to them. And the pressure to do more in less time never lets up. Everyday there's some reminder that you could do better, accomplish more, be more popular, run faster, move higher up the success ladder, dress cooler, be more attractive, get into a more prestigious college, be other than you are.

I mean, think about all the messages everyday that tell you that you are not quite good enough. And that can be exhausting whatever your age. Some days it's just hard to see that your little life matters. Some days it's hard to be hopeful.

So, I wonder if the man by the pool was crippled by the loss of hope....

Well, here's what I know about hope. If there are two rooms, one dark, and the other with the lights on...if I open the door between them, the dark room becomes lighter.

And that happened every Wednesday evening with you. That hour was like opening the door to a room filled with the light of hope.....

I mean, I saw light in Julia's gently spoken conviction. We all saw it in Julia – that gentleness and strength are not opposites. And the room was brighter, more hope-filled, because of her.

And the light was also in Dennis' way of reminding us, with a smile, that there is always more than one way to see things. It's astonishing how a smile can light up a room with hope.

And we all saw it – the light, the hopefulness – in Bruce's winsomeness and humor, which combined with his thoughtfulness, meant we could talk about serious things and still laugh at ourselves.

And in this time when so many think convictions have to be shouted, Catherine was a calm, quiet presence. She modeled the power of listening. So when she spoke we did too – listen. And it brightened the room every Wednesday.

As did Lauren's unwillingness to accept the too simple, black and white answer. Maybe there's more to it, she would say. There must be more to it. And the "more" sounded like hope – didn't it?

And Lydia's probing also helped us go deeper. For Lydia, every question calls for another question. Which is a hopeful way of seeing things, because the way to more light is through the question, not the claim of a final answer.

On those Wednesdays we learned that Hope's name fits her. We counted on her enthusiasm and her way of appreciating the present moment. She reminded us not to take anything for granted and to live what is. And it sounded like hope.

And there was a calming hopefulness in Megan's voice. We may not be able to understand the awful things, but there's an essential goodness too, she would say. And we can trust the goodness. We have to trust the goodness, Megan would say.

David made these interesting connections between the topic and something else. It was reminder that truth is not always found where you expect it. Which is a very hopeful way of seeing the world.

Erica held doubt and belief in creative tension. There was light in Erica's understanding that doubt and belief are not opposites, and that good religion, personal integrity, and hope are nourished by doubt actually.

Mary Ferris brought her passion for fairness, her roller derby tenacity, and her sense of humor, which is a hope-filled combination really. It helped us to talk about hard things without becoming self-righteous or hardened or giving up.

And Rheanna gently reminded us when we needed reminding that what we think we can know about life is only a tiny piece of what is, so we best be humble. For real hope always grows out of humility.

And there was Maia's compassion for the vulnerable and those pushed aside by systems or indifference. How are we gonna walk our talk, she'd ask. How can we reach out even more? Hope-filled questions these.

Each Wednesday there was also Zach's enthusiasm for the question of the night. No question was uninteresting for him. He wanted to hear what everyone thought. And in a culture too often bored to death, Zach's interest was another word for hope.

And who could hear Annie Rose's contagious laugh and not feel hopeful? Even as she was willing to speak from her heart and put into words that we all struggle with things, so we best treat each other with kindness....

In the story, Jesus shows up at the pool, walks to the man lying there. In my mind I see Jesus kneel beside the man, put his hand on the man's shoulder, and Jesus tells him to... Get up.

Get up: God gave you the gift of your life. And that gift matters.

So get up: Live the miracle you are. God's world wouldn't be complete without your life and all the ways you can help heal this broken world with your love.

Get up, Jesus said.

Get up: The world and God needs you now.

And feeling hope-filled again, it says the man...got up....

You know, something like that happened most Wednesday evenings. You filled and lit up a room with your hope. Even on the days when things weren't going well in school or in the world, there was light in that room.

So when the hour was over, we got up, and went out into the world, strengthened inside, and blessed by the shared hope in that room.

It was extraordinary really – surprisingly powerful.

I might even call it another of those darned miracles....

