

Healing Miracles

Sermon by Bob Sessions

I was looking forward to preaching again...until I began to grasp the conditions of my re-entry. Last week Bishop Scarff was here, and talk about a hard act to follow. Then this week we bid fond farewell to my favorite bishop, Chris Epting, who should be preaching instead of me today. To top it off, fate dished up a topic that liberal Christians have a hard time talking about—miracles. Thanks, Jane! Well, here we go. My new preaching career might be short lived. You tell me.

When I was a teenager my brother and I used to listen to Oral Roberts on the radio. Remember him? The founder of Oral Roberts University in Tulsa and a very successful radio and then televangelist. We had great fun holding on to the radio and waiting for a healing miracle to come our way when Roberts proclaimed “heal!” As far as I know, a miracle never came our way.

I realize now that Roberts, and other faith healers I’ve seen on television, helped launch my career in philosophy. They taught me how to be skeptical, to look at the world objectively and not through the lens of my needs and emotions. This skepticism affected my relationships to religion, including my perspective on the many “miracles,” especially the healing miracles of Jesus.

My favorite undergraduate teacher, Dale Miller at Drake University, taught me how to read the Bible as a book filled with history, conflicting stories, many styles, and metaphors. He believed that the miracles in the gospel of Luke, for example, were always temptation stories that showed Jesus’ struggle to stay true to his difficult path to

crucifixion, rather than be heralded as a messiah come to liberate the Jews or be venerated for his miraculous powers.

I've long been convinced by this liberal perspective that tries to wrest an understanding of Jesus' miracles away from the supernatural interpretations and theologies of conservative Christians. I'm sure many of you have had a similar trajectory wherein you have tried to reconcile science and religion, fact and belief. Last week the bishop basically treated the miracle of Jesus calming the sea as a metaphor, the common liberal interpretive strategy.

Without appeal to the supernatural, though, can we really make sense of Jesus healing a woman who merely touched his cloak or his bringing a comatose girl back to life? Sure, we can use these stories metaphorically and often with great value. But aren't we really just stuck saying that Jesus/God can do anything, including defying the laws of nature?

I've tentatively concluded that the solution to this difficult dilemma lies with the Placebo Effect. You heard me right--that phenomenon wherein a person's hopes (and fears) seem to be self-fulfilling prophecies. Wishful thinking. I used to pooh pooh the Placebo Effect in the same way I do conspiracy theories and other fantasies that plague our common lives in countless ways in this age of almost unimaginable power of our electronic snake oils.

After reading Erik Vance's book, *Suggestible You: The Curious Science of Your Brain's Ability to Deceive, Transform and Heal*, I'm not so quick to dismiss the Placebo Effect. It turns out that scientists have been studying it for 50 years now and they know a great deal about how it works.

And work it does. This mind-body connection is so powerful that pharmaceutical companies must prove that the drugs they have spent years and millions of dollars developing are at least as effective as the so-called Placebo Effect. More than half of their new miracle drugs fail this test and have to be scrapped! They hate the comparison of their products with sugar pills...until they get a drug approved. Then they love it because it provides cover for their products: our drug is better than people's faith! It turns out that the Placebo Effect is very real, very powerful, and now well understood scientifically.

Details aside, this ubiquitous phenomenon is pretty simple. Our brains are expectation devices: they spend much of their energies trying to prepare us for what is next based on what we have already experienced. From an evolutionary perspective this makes perfect sense as this strategy prepares us for the most likely events, which helps guarantee our safety and survival. The second major set of ingredients are stories. The stories we believe, whether we make them up or we get them from others, feed into our brain's preparations for the coming moments.

Expectations and stories. So if you believe your government deceives you, and if those around you tell stories about even further ways that this is true, you are difficult to convince that your government has your best interest in mind.

Or if you have been told convincingly (a good story) that a new drug will take away your chronic headache or back pain, when you are given a placebo instead of the new miracle drug, you are as likely to find relief as if you were given the drug.

History is filled with snake oil stories. Vance tells many stories to illustrate the efficacy of the healing power of faith. In the 19th century a shrewd salesman convinced people that magnetism could be used to cure various ailments, and he was successful

even when he just “magnetized water” and sold it as a cure. People who believed his lies had their pain diminished or eliminated.

The Placebo Effect is rarely a cure, but it often heals. Just like headache medicine. It won't take away your cancer or heal your broken bone. But it can be quite as effective as most medicines if you have pain, colitis, depression, anxiety or even Parkinson's.

Why? Brain scientists have located the places and ways this Effect operates just as they have with drugs. You already know that our bodies have amazing healing powers: think of the stories you've heard or cases you've known where someone suffers a serious illness or bone-shattering accident and they recover. When we believe a drug will make us feel better it tends to because the body releases a cornucopia of hormones, such as dopamine, that go to work on what ails us. Even if the drug is a placebo.

Part of what makes placebos effective is theater. Studies show that people tend to put more faith in a doctor if they wear the proper white robe, have a stethoscope around their neck and speak in an authoritative manner using technical words. I'm convinced this factor was important in the longevity and health of my mother-in-law. Grace lived to the age of 90 even though she didn't follow many of the practices that benefit health. But when we asked her if she was taking care of herself she would always say, “Well, I've been doctoring.” I believe that besides her strong inherited Norwegian constitution, deep faith in the efficacy of doctors was part of why she lived so long and well.

Another large scale study argues that the reason that traditional Chinese medicine, including acupuncture, herbs or rhino horns work far better than they should is because the Chinese believe in them. After all, how could so many people for so long be wrong?

Medicine at the time and place of Jesus was like traditional Chinese medicine.

Not very effective, and it's all they had, so people often sought something more. Jesus was an astute observer of people and he realized the power of stories. The gospels tell us that almost everything he said to people outside of his close circle came in the form of parables, teaching stories. And as he traveled about, his reputation grew and so people experienced a powerful crowd effect. The poor woman with the long term illness was desperate and it seems she would try anything. She is primed for a Placebo Effect which is initiated not with a sugar pill, but just by touching his robe. And when she gets healed, what does Jesus say to her? "Your faith has healed you."

I'm not sure what to make of the comatose girl story. The way it's told, though, it's clear that a crucial ingredient in her healing is the faith of her parents. They were afraid she was dying. Jesus responds to their fear and she wakes up.

My fear in thinking about approaching miracles this way is that it is reductionistic, that it reduces faith to body chemistry. In a way, I suppose it does. But think about it. Our faith is that God is incarnate, not distant and other worldly. God's hands are involved in everything we experience and are. So why would we be surprised to discover that powerful medicine is built into us. Our bodies heal themselves and we can help heal each other and ourselves. Stories like the two Mark tells, other uplifting stories of the Bible, and our tradition have given us the expectations and stories we need to heal much of what ails us. Let us be about our Father's work. Amen