

Year B 17<sup>th</sup> Sun OT

**When the Miracles Stop** – John 6:1-15

Theme: faith in hard times

*Jesus went across the sea of Galilee. A large crowd followed him because they saw the miracles he was performing.*

It's vacation time, it's summer time, when the livin' is easy. Should I try to tease your minds and hearts in such a context? Should I offer the challenging homily this gospel provokes? Well, why not? You can always complain to the pastor.

It's the opening words of the gospel I just cited that raise the issue: "*A large crowd followed him because they saw the miracles....*" Well, I ask, who wouldn't follow? You'd be dense not to. My challenging question is this: what happens when the miracles cease? When they dry up? Will we follow Jesus when there are no more miracles?

Will I follow when my child is born genetically defective and all the prayers in world aren't pulling in the miracle that would make her any different than a prospect for lifelong care? When my spouse is killed in an automobile accident and there is no miracle of resurrection, when I am diagnosed with a terminal illness and no miraculous cure appears? When bad things happen to good people and there are no miracles to right the equation? When, in a word, there are no miracles and no more God, at least none that I can detect, when faith is shaken if not evaporated altogether? Will we follow then? So again, my question: will we follow Jesus when we no longer see miracles?

A woman who lost her child at birth and almost her faith writes:  
All my multi-layered, carefully constructed faith was stripped away as I focused on one thing: the injustice that our little girl didn't have a chance to take even a single breath....Prayer seemed so futile, even unnecessary, like throwing a glass of water on a burning house. I had prayed my entire pregnancy for the baby to be healthy—and she was. Carly was perfect but she wasn't alive, cooing in my arms. How could I not feel betrayed?...

In the weeks following Carry's death, well-meaning friends and relatives called and sent hundreds of cards and letters offering helpless words of condolence. Most of their efforts said the same thing: "It was God's will. We cannot understand God's will." Those words kept me up at night for months, spinning through my frantic mind, tying me in philosophical knots. I know they were trying to help, but every time the issue of God's will sprang up, I was miserable. It got to the point where I couldn't even numbly smile or nod any more when the phrase inevitably popped up. I just clenched my teeth to keep from saying something I'd regret.

Finally, exhausted, this woman who lost her child and almost her faith, punctuates her long sorrow with these plaintive words:

Some may wonder why, after our experience, I still want to make the painful effort to believe. I can only respond that, despite my doubts, having seen the breathtaking perfection of my daughter's peaceful face, it is impossible to think God was not there.

Somehow, beyond the miracle that never came, she sensed Someone.

Let's hold that in mind while I move to a short story I once read about a doubt-ridden Jesuit priest. Since the age of ten, he had been plagued by doubts. Finally, however, he develops a doubt that will not pass; he begins to doubt the love of God. In the face of his doubt, he prays for faith, but none comes. So, he prays for hope, but when that is not given either, he simply goes on with his duties—teaching, preaching, saying Mass. Then, one bright, clear day, after saying Mass, he is driving home to the rectory when he comes across a terrible automobile accident. A young man lies dying, trapped in an overturned car. The priest is able to force open the crumpled car door and manages to cradle the nearly dead man in his arms.

Taking a vial of holy oil from his pocket, the priest anoints the dying man, pronouncing, "I absolve you from all your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." But, then, nothing happens. There is no shift in the world, no change in the dire situation, no word from heaven, not even any human rescuers come. Only the silent world and the dying young man's harsh, half-choked breathing. The priest begins to pray recited prayers, rote prayers, prayers about Mary, prayers to the Father in heaven. He feels foolish, but what else can he

do, what else can he say? He wants that miracle.

He wonders, what would God do at such a moment, if there were a God? "Well, do it!" he says aloud, and hears the fury in his voice. "Say something!" But there was silence from heaven....What could anyone say to this crushed, dying thing, he wonders. What would God say if he cared as much as I?....The young man suddenly turns in some dying reflex, and his head tilts in the priest's arms, trusting, like a lover. The priest could see death beginning across his face. At once the priest, faithless, unrepentant, gives up altogether, bends over him, and whispers, fierce and burning, "*I love you.*" He continues until there is no breath: "*I love you, I love you, I love you,*" a cry which means that even if God didn't come through with a miracle, *he* loves the dying young man. What now?

This is hard, but I suggest in this story that the priest is fundamentally a converted man even though he doesn't know it. He is a man who has quite painfully moved from a childish faith to a mature and hopeful one.

What happened is that the priest, when you come right down to it, was forced to give up his immature idea of a God who comes with miracle in hand when we whistle to make everything all right, in favor of a God who summons the faithful to be present when a need arises, to be his incarnate divine mercy at this time and place. **In other words, the priest, lacking a miracle, himself becomes the miracle.** God was there and held that dying boy through the arms of the priest.

So today's gospel in its own way poses the question: will we follow Jesus when the miracles stop? When our daughter dies, when our son is killed? Will we, like the woman who lost her child, see the absent miracles as an invitation to seek the miracle worker himself? Will we consider the possibility that, when all is said and done, after the shock is over and the tears are dried, *we* ourselves might be the miracle?

I don't know. It's tough to stand in someone else's shoes. I just know that, of course, the folks in the gospel story were sensible and savvy enough to follow Jesus *because* of the miracles he was performing. But I also know that folks are even more sensible and spiritually savvy enough to realize that magic tricks are just that: tricks to get you to the magician and to be discarded once you have found

him.

And so we are challenged to love Jesus for who he is rather than for the free bread he can give us. Dried-up miracles can help us focus on the real miracle: that we are called to be the compassion and presence of God. It is, as I said, a tough call, but a call nevertheless.

Anyway, it's something to think about on a summer day. As you heard, the gospel story had a happy ending. Lots of people saw miracles and were fed with a new one. But it's also time to think about those who saw none and were left excruciatingly hungry...hungry for some answers, some sign, some way, ultimately, to live without miracles and still live with Jesus.