



sought the spiritual gift of discerning spirits and casting them out. Then I thought, I routinely pray for healing for anyone. So I would pray in my own way for healing. The individuals on the sickbed would conceive of it as an exorcism of an evil spirit. And guess what, it worked anyway. Despite my own lack of any idea whatsoever of what I was doing, God overlooked that and intervened anyway, and the malevolent spirit left the person.

Remember this: with unclean spirits and with all interventions of prayer, the outcome is not in our hands but in God's. Good outcomes are not because of our strength, but rather in spite of our weaknesses. We should always, always keep that in mind when we are talking about miracles.

**W**e know with certainty miracles happened in Jesus' day – exorcisms and healings. We're working our way through the first chapter of Mark as are many other churches in our area. Verses 21-39 cover exactly the first 24 hours of Jesus' ministry. Today's lesson is the latter part of that first day.



After his baptism in the Jordan by John, after forty days in the wilderness, and after news of John's arrest came, Jesus began his earthly ministry by calling the first disciples, the very first of whom was Simon Peter. Jesus inaugurated God's reign in one single day – a full Sabbath day – a solitary but extraordinary twenty four hour period. Jesus brought in the kingdom:

- by first calling his disciples to follow him;
- by teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum to everyone's astonishment as Scripture says;
- by exorcising an unclean spirit from a man in the synagogue on a Sabbath – breaking the law of God;

- by healing Peter's mother-in-law – also breaking the Sabbath laws;
- and then Jesus closed that extraordinary first day of God's kingdom by "curing many who were sick with various diseases, and casting out many demons."

What a day! A pretty good day's work by anyone's measure.

Don't you just wish you could have been there?

Don't you wish we could have been there to witness it for ourselves?

Would we have been among the believers – or the scoffers?

Would we be there merely to see a bunch of miracles or to listen and learn from Jesus?

This day represents a microcosm of Jesus' entire earthly ministry – calling, teaching, casting out demons, healing – a clear portrait of God's plan for humanity.

**B**esides the point that Jesus would break God's apparent law in order to uphold God's true law, Mark is at great pains to make two other extremely important points throughout this narrative:

- First, God's healing power is not just for the privileged few – not just for the top 1% who can afford healthcare – not just for men or women only. Jesus is an equal opportunity healer. Both the man with the unclean spirit and Simon's mother-in-law were just average people – and in that day the average person was – poor – in the 99%. Healing was, is for everyone. God's healing is available for each of us. First point – clear?



- Second, even more critically, Mark is at pains to point out that Jesus did not – repeat did not – want to be known as a miracle worker. Jesus is so much more. That's why he silenced the spirits and moved on to the next village when folks showed signs they had missed the point. Mark



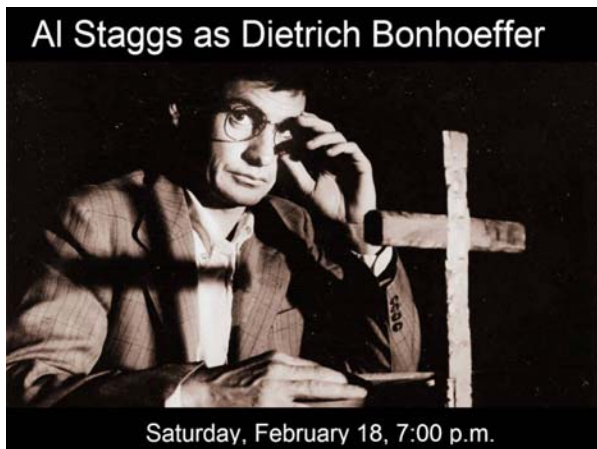
makes this point here and numerous other places in the Gospel. Remember that Jesus was so insistent:

**“Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.”**

Proclaim the message, not to become yet another of a thousand miracle worker who crisscrossed the land. Keep these well focused in your minds. Jesus’ healing is available to all. And while healings were an important part of Jesus ministry, it is so easy to overemphasize them. Miracles are not the kingdom – merely signs of the kingdom. The last thing Jesus wanted was for them to distract us from his message of God’s plan seeking fulfillment in the world.

**S**o we turn to the question: do miracles happen – today? Do they happen not just in so-called primitive cultures, but here in post-Enlightenment, post-Modern America. Many have had painful experiences with miracles. Al Staggs is a Baptist minister in San

Antonio. He’s gifted with a dramatic flare and does a mean Dietrich Bonhoeffer imitation in his one man show.



Al Staggs tells of his own wife’s illness and death. Several friends came by a few weeks before his wife passed. With the best of intention, they would offer stories of miraculous healings. His wife growing annoyed with such reports finally silenced these well-meaning visitors with:

“It hasn’t worked that way for us.”

Staggs began to ponder the helpfulness of such healing stories under the circumstances. For all the ‘successful’ miraculous healing stories, he asks:

“Has your vaulted prayer program yet kept anyone alive forever?...Eventually we all die, including those who were healed of their particular disease. No one has yet managed to avoid the grim reaper. So why save our success stories for just those

precious few who have been allowed a few months or years longer than they would otherwise have had?”

He has a point and a good one. Miracles do happen, but why you and not me? Does God play favorites?

**O**K allowing that miracles do happen but are indeed rare in our age, we struggle to fathom why one person's prayers are answered while a thousand persons in similar dire straits, why their prayers are unanswered.



My own mother suffered a severe case of polio in the last great polio epidemic when I was four. She was confined to a bed and wheelchair for the rest of her life. When I was a little older a Presbyterian family moved in across the street with sons my own age. Steve and I often played together after school.



The mother would visit often as well – she was of the “Expect a miracle!” faith-healing side of Christianity. Well-meaning and with the best of intentions, she would pray for healing and tell my mother that she would walk again if my dear mother would only “have enough faith.” Over time, the well intentioned prayer took on a more judgmental tone: “you’re not walking yet, you don’t have enough faith.”

On those occasions after the woman left, my mother would be in tears. I would say, “Mother, please don’t cry. She’s wrong saying your faith is weak.” Mother would explain she wasn’t crying because she thought her own faith was weak. She wasn’t even crying because she couldn’t walk. She was crying because the faith of her friend required a miracle to believe.

Mother had long ago grown past the stage of faith where we bargain with God = “God prove you are there by doing what I want.” She indeed hoped for, prayed for, expected a miracle. But in contrast she

accepted whatever outcome God decree with gratitude. She blessed God whatever the circumstances. This is not faith which turns cynical when the answer is “No.” The faith of Job: **“The LORD gives. The LORD takes away. Blessed be the name of the LORD.”**

**T**hat dear friend, with all her good intentions, she rationalizes the failure to receive a miracle as a sign of weakness. She reduces prayer down to “Jean, if you were worthy God will give you what you ask.” That emphatically is not, how God works. Jesus didn’t work that way either.

That day, that first day of Jesus’ ministry in Capernaum, many, most of those coming for exorcism and healing were undoubtedly unworthy. One could make the easy case that anyone with a demon was unworthy by definition – anyone who inadvertently or advertently let their guard down and let a demon in for example. Yet in Jesus’ eyes and God’s eyes, most often the unworthy are the very ones most in need of wholeness, most in need of restoration in their lives.

God’s logic is indeed well above our own logic and God’s thoughts are indeed far beyond ours. Those on whom God bestows or does not bestow a miracle is a calculus we cannot make, nor should we ever try. We do not, emphatically do not, earn our miracles. God grants miracles not because of our worthiness – but in spite of our unworthiness. That’s what we mean by grace.



**D**espite being good, post-Enlightenment, post-Modern people, we are nevertheless people consumed with miracles. We rarely ask miracles for things over which we have no control. We most often come to God in a crisis of our own making, expecting God to abort the laws of physics and lead us miraculously out of the messes we have gotten ourselves into. More often than not we are disappointed because God doesn’t work that way.

The best miracles, the real miracles are the unexpected ones, the surprising ones, the ones we have not prayed for. The real miracles, God's miracles are unanticipated. That's what we mean by grace.

What's the take away? We need to be careful and certainly make no judgments in our miracle requests. The good news is that with God's kingdom come miracles – a cardinal sign of God's reign. Living in God's reign means healing, health and wholeness are commonplace. God's plan for us includes miracles – unlimited in time and space.