

Wesley United Methodist Church

January 12, 2014

"Miracle Stories."

Isaiah 42:1-9, Acts 10:34-48

Because of a devastating childhood illness at the age of nineteen months, Helen Keller (1880-1968) was left both blind and deaf. Her life was written up as a "miracle story" and became a play called "The Miracle Worker". But the miracle Helen Keller experienced was not any return of hearing or vision. The "miracle" she received was the miracle of her committed, loving family, and of her relentlessly optimistic and patient teacher, Anne Sullivan.

When Helen was seven years old, trapped in a world where she could only communicate through a few hand signals with the family cook, her parents arranged for a twenty-year-old, visually impaired teacher to come and work with their daughter. Using American Sign Language, Anne Sullivan spent months "spelling" words into Helen's hands. Everything Helen touched, everything she ate, every person she encountered, was "spelled out" into her hand.

At first Helen Keller didn't get it. These random motions being pressed into her palm did not connect with experiences she felt. But Sullivan refused to give up. She kept spelling words. She kept giving references for everything Helen encountered.

Finally there was a "watershed" moment, which was indeed water-powered. Helen's breakthrough moment was as she was having water pumped over her hands and Anne Sullivan kept spelling the word for "water" over and over into her palm. Suddenly Helen "got it." She realized those gestures meant something real and tangible. They were naming what she was experiencing.

The world of communication, reading, literature, human interaction were all made possible to one person through the gift of another person. The "miracle" Helen's teacher Anne Sullivan worked was the miracle of patience. She simply kept on and kept at it, showing Helen there were "words" for "things," and there was true meaning behind all Helen's experiences.

Patience is not a very well-regarded virtue these days. If it takes more than five seconds for a computer to connect us to the information speedway, we all start pounding keys and elevating our blood pressure.

This week's text from Acts demonstrates again how far that mind set is from God's relationship creation. Peter was called, along with his brother Andrew, as Jesus' first disciples. He was with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry, until the bitter end at the cross. He was present at the empty tomb and witness to the risen Christ. He experienced the vision of Ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And yet, throughout his life-changing sea of experiences, something inside of Peter had refused to budge, refused to fully acknowledge the world-changing events that were playing out before his eyes. If we learn to be "good" like we learn to play a guitar--Peter was a slow learner.

It is only now--after the Ascension, after Pentecost, after yet another heavenly vision from God that Peter "gets it." Peter comes before Cornelius, a Gentile, in his Gentile household, and finally has the insight to admit--"I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but that in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (v.34). Wow!!

It only took a lifetime of living and working with Jesus. It only took watching Jesus extend his love and compassion and healing powers to lepers and Gentiles and tax collectors and "sinners" of all stripes, for the entirety of his ministry. It only took the miracle of the resurrection--the greatest event in the history of the world, the divine demonstration of God's power of life and death, and the transforming gift of the Holy Spirit to give Peter this final insight.

Talk about "divine patience." All God had to do was send his only Son as an example of God's love and as a sacrifice for our stubborn sinfulness. Before Jesus all God had to do was deliver the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery and then watch them flounder around foolishly in the wilderness for forty years. Then there were all the "judges," or better named "saviors" those who spoke God's words to the people. A word sometimes heeded. A word most often not. Then the people demanded a king. Saul didn't work out so well. David had his ups and downs. After Solomon it was pretty much downhill. Then God sent prophets--lots of them. These prophets proclaimed God's truths, preached God's messages, and pretty much got kicked to the curb.

Yet God's patience persevered. Jesus' eternal patience with his chosen disciples is the dictionary definition of divine diligence. Heal the sick, walk on water, still storms, feed thousands, raise the dead--so maybe his chosen eyewitnesses will "get it." Still Peter hid on the night of Jesus' arrest. Still Peter and the others cowered in the upper room after the crucifixion. And in today's Acts we learn another "still" still Peter doubted the all-encompassing power of God's love and acceptance, even after the resurrection. Until he received a special divine message.

Acts 10:34-43 is a short story form of Jesus' life, mission, death and resurrection. As Peter stands in a new and unknown environment, in the household of Cornelius the Gentile, he gives testimony of what he finally knows to be true and begins to finally understand what that truth means. Finally!!

Things have changed. For Peter, truth-telling is story-telling the story of Jesus. He is telling an on-going story, an experience of the present that is empowered by Jesus' presence and work. The world has changed because of Jesus. Peter finally "get's it." Cornelius, the Gentile, his family, his friends, all those who hear and respond to the message and mission, the person and presence, of Christ, are included. "God shows no partiality." All who are open to God's message of love to Christ's redeeming gift, all are welcome, all are equal, all are embraced by the same Spirit that had been offered since creation. The never-ending story is a story based on an event in the past, an experience in the present, and an expectation of the future.

Finally, Peter had grasped the fact that Jesus was not only an event in the past--a man he had lived with and whose works he had witnessed. Jesus was alive in the present. The Jesus event in the past was an outgoing experience in the present--in the here and now. The Jesus story forever changed the past, the present, and the future. Peter finally "got it." To be a true follower of Jesus, meant that he had to do the work that he was called to do. Change "everything" as well--the past, the present, the future.

Jesus did not call disciples just to follow in the footsteps he made on earth. It is one thing to follow in someone's footsteps. It is quite another to fill their shoes, walk in them, and be their feet. Jesus calls his disciples, from the first generation until this generation and for every future generation, to walk in his shoes, to slip on his sandals, to wear his Crocs--wherever that path may lead. That is what it meant to experience the story of Jesus in the present. That is what it means to be a day-to-day disciple.

For Peter it meant traveling to the home of a Gentile and inviting him and his whole household into the Christian community of the Holy Spirit. What does it mean for us today? Where will we be willing to go? With whom will we be found sitting at a table?

I have known about God since childhood; I've spent a major part of my life studying, living, and working at following Jesus. As I am learning to know others more as the persons they are, I am discovering that what I did to others, I also did to God. Coming to know others is a venture in seeing others as uniquely other, of hearing others as differing in views and values, and of appreciating these differences. Someone said, "God created man in his own image. And man, being a gentleman, returned the favor."

Whom will we be willing to embrace because the love of Jesus and the patience of God, whom will we be willing to look at, not as a mirror for ourselves, but as a window into the wondrous creativity of God? God wants to turn our lives into miracle stories, miracle stories based on an event in the past, an experience in the present, and an expectation of the future.