



You Have a Gift! Signs and Healings and Miracles Luke 5:17-26 September 25, 2005

This week we received email from Carol Bullard, who has gone on a mission trip to India to assist Dr. Kunjumon Chacko at the Precious Children's Homes:

"I arrived very tired and safely at the Cochin airport Monday morning. I was met and took a ride scarier than any roller coaster I've ever ridden for about an hour to reach the Precious Children and Seminary campus. Their roads are atrocious... The drivers are insane.

"I live in the children's building. My room is on the floor for little girls 5-9. ... The children hover in the halls to smile at me and speak – "How are you?" or "Good Morning," etc. every time my door opens.

"The children are indeed precious. ... I eat in the dining hall of the seminary. ... I get a lot of rice. They usually have a stew with very little meat to go over the rice, vegetables, always bananas for dessert. I asked for coffee in the mornings and get a weak café au lait... with breakfast.

"Last night was the first night I've actually slept through the night."

And so begins Carol's mission adventure in India. And who knows what gifts of the spirit she will discover in her? God knows, she will certainly find many ways to put them to work there. Maybe Carol will discover within her a gift of words she didn't know she had before, like the gift of teaching or the gift of evangelism. Certainly Carol will get opportunities to put to work gifts of deeds of helping or mercy or compassion or giving.

These past two weeks I've been giving you examples of the spiritual gifts of words, and examples of the spiritual gifts of deeds that God distributes among us. This week I want to show you a third set of spiritual gifts from God, the gifts of signs. What I mean by the gifts of signs is this: God grants to us spiritual powers that, when we put them to work, become signs that point to God at work in our midst. These are spiritual gifts that point to a God that is breaking right into our lives.

For example: there is the sign/gift of discernment. To some people God gives the gift of being able to see through actions and situations and know what is good and what is not. They can see deep into people and know what is in their hearts. They can see what gifts God has given others and help them claim those gifts.

Another sign/gift is the gift of tongues. Tongues can mean earthly languages. I know people whom God has gifted with a knack for using Spanish, German, Greek, even Coptic to communicate the gospel in people's native tongues. The International Bible Society keeps on working to translate the Bible into every tongue on earth. In the sense of earthly languages, our own Roger Bullard has the gift of tongues as he continues his work in translating.

Tongues can also mean a heavenly language we call *glossolalia*. I have known people who had this gift, and used it as a sign pointing to God. This gift of the spirit requires another gift along with it, the gift of interpretation of tongues, so that ecstatic utterances will not confuse the church but rather build it up.

Discernment, tongues, and interpretation are examples of some of the spiritual gifts God gives as signs of God's presence in the world. But today I want to focus on two spiritual gifts and signs: miracles and healings. Here is one of my favorite miracles stories, from Luke 5:17-26 (read).

HEALING THE PARALYTIC WHO DROPPED IN FROM THE ROOF

I've loved this story since I was a boy, because it was one time that people got to tear something up and it was a good thing. The men and women of the Gulfport disaster recovery team discovered that they had a talent for tearing things up. After a mud-out or two, we got really good at it. One family whose roof the team had fixed invited us back for lunch. We all walked inside their house, went through the cook-out line, looked around and told the owner "You know, we could have this whole house cleaned out down to the studs in a half hour if you wanted us to."

This crew of friends in Luke's story does remind me of a Baptist disaster team. I can just imagine them pulling up their trailer, getting out the ladders and the chain saw and the rope, taking the chain saw to the roof, and then lowering their paralyzed friend down to an impressed Jesus. Jesus WAS impressed -- by their persistence and their determination and their faith that once they had done their part, Jesus would do his. They had faith that the power of the God was with Jesus.

So Jesus, impressed by their faith, said to the man on the pallet, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." Now, this ignited a real brouhaha among the religious leaders who were watching, because they knew that only God has power to forgive sins. And that was the point. Jesus had the man rise up and walk as a sign that the forgiving and healing power of God was in Jesus. Jesus had the gift of miracles and they pointed right toward God saying, "God is right here, at work."

Now for us, we are not at all surprised that Jesus had this power. But we are a little confused that the first thing Jesus said to this man was, "Your sins are forgiven." Was he saying that this man was lame because of his sin? Some people thought that way then and still do now. The best thought I have found on this is, "Jesus does not treat sin as the cause of the man's affliction. Rather he uses the healing to confirm his authority to forgive sins." (Alan Culpepper, *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary of Luke/John*, p. 122)

Still, sickness from physical illness and sickness from sin are very close to each other. And healing and forgiveness are very close to each other. Under that gaping roof, this healing miracle was a sign pointing toward the power of God to make right whatever is wrong with any dimension of our beings. I can just see the friends up on the roof giving each other high fives -- for themselves, for their friend, and for this sign of God's power in Jesus.

And then the people down around Jesus gave high fives too. Well, actually, the text says, "they glorified God," saying "We have seen strange things today." (Luke 5:26) Interesting, by the way, how the Greek root for "glorify" is *doxa*, and the word for "strange" is *paradoxa* (The source for our word "paradox). They are two appropriate responses to the mysterious power of God: *Doxa!* "Glory be!" And *Paradoxa!*, "Very strange..." Doxology, and paradoxology! Altogether, the miracle and the healing are glorious, paradoxical signs pointing to God at work in our lives.

But now get ready for something more glorious and more strange. The same gifts for miracle and healing that God gave Jesus, God passed on also to the early church that followed Jesus. Jesus promised his followers that they would "do greater works than these." (John 14.12) And sure enough, when the church got started, "many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles." (Acts 5.12) The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles came from the same hand. Acts is the sequel to Luke. When you move from Luke to Acts, you discover a pattern: everything that happened to Jesus in Luke goes on to happen to the believers in Acts. As Jesus was persecuted, they were persecuted. As Jesus taught, they taught. As Jesus did signs and wonders, they did signs and wonders.

"One day Peter and John were going up to the temple..." (Acts 3.1) A man lame from birth asked if they could spare some change. Peter said, "Silver and gold have I none, but what I have I give to you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." (3:6) The man rose and walked with them into the temple, leaping and praising, giving glory and doxology to God. The very same spiritual gifts that God had given Jesus were now in Jesus' followers. They had been given the gifts of signs that pointed right toward the work of God among them.

But now, brace yourselves for something even more glorious and even more strange: now, those same gifts for miracle and healing have been given to the modern church today. There are among us believers to whom God has given the gift of miracles and healing. Yes, I said that. And before you fit me for a strait jacket, hear me out.

I'm not going to start inviting our radio listeners to put their hands on their radios and be healed. I don't believe in that. Healing was never that way in the New Testament. The gift of healing was never packaged and mass-produced. No one in the New Testament ever said, "Now I'm going to perform a miracle. Stand back!" Healings were never flaunted in loud crusades, but waited on in quiet prayer. In fact, the gift of healing was more like a one-time inner nudge to follow God's lead in a particular situation and let God work. And, healing was never opposed to the skills of medicine.

On the contrary, early Christian prayers were often accompanied with the anointing of oil, oil being the basic medical technology of the day. So, no hands on your radio today.

On the other hand, neither am I going to demythologize healings and miracles. I am not going to wax poetic and syrupy about how there is a miracle in everything we do, how there is healing in just touching a hand, or a miracle in every sunrise and every birth. I am talking about spiritual powers given by God to people like you and me to make people whole and to do unusually mighty works. I am talking about remarkable spiritual gifts that build up people and build up God's church.

Healers are people through whom the peace of God is mediated. Some doctors and nurses are healers, not simply because of their clinical skills, but because some of them are particularly gifted by God to make people whole. Some counselors and mental health professionals are healers, not because of the diplomas on their walls, but because God has granted them a spiritual gift to heal people on the inside.

There are also people who "witness remarkable answers to prayer, extra strength in times of need, abundant provision in scarcity, and timely protection in danger." There are "persons with the gift . . . to participate with God to do powerful works that transcend" the ordinary course of events. (*Patricia Brown, Spirit Gifts, p. 57*)

My mother might not think that she has the spiritual gift of healing, but I do. She is a retired surgical nurse, and a deacon, and when anyone in her church has surgery, she is usually there. She interprets what the doctors tell them. She is a steady presence. When she walks into a room, people feel better! I believe God has placed a spiritual power in her.

And what is the purpose of these spiritual powers? That all will be freed from whatever illness or obstacles prevents them from fulfilling their ministry. That people will notice the signs that God is present and working in our world. Now, they are never knockdown proof of divine activity. Not all the people who witnessed Jesus' miracles believed. But miracles and healing are always a challenge. "Should we assign it to God? Or should we explain it away?" (*Michael Green, Who Is This Jesus? p. 49*)

And for those of us who haven't received a gift of healing or miracle, we can at least do what those guys on the roof did: they let no obstacle stand in the way of getting God's help for their friend. They cooperated with God's power for healing. And so we can do the same, we can do what we can to get people through the roof to Jesus. We can tear down any barrier between those who need healing and Jesus the healer.

Thank God for the spiritual gifts of healings and miracles. They are signs that God is with us, that God is at work with us, and that we are here for a purpose. If God has placed a gift like that in you, then ponder what purpose it is there for. Ponder what purpose you are here for.

-- Douglas E. Murray