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Gottlieb Werner Luetkehoelter

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HISTORICAL SERIES, 12

Arranging A Miracle

Gottlieb W. Luetkehoelter

*Bishop (Ret.), Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada
Winipeg, Manitoba*

(The Rev. Dr. G.W. Luetkehoelter was the first Bishop of the Manitoba/Northwestern Ontario Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada, from 1986 to 1994. Prior to that he had been Bishop of the Central Canada Synod of the Lutheran Church in America from 1975 to 1985, and this sermon was prepared for and made available to congregations of the Manitoba District of that Synod whose pastors would be attending the District Conference in Thompson, Manitoba, 9-11 February, 1979.)

Text: Mark 1:40-45

In today's Old Testament reading (I Kings 5) we hear of the healing of Naaman the leper, and in this Gospel reading, Mark tells of Jesus stretching out his hand and healing a leper. The story invites us to consider the power God has to heal the leper, and us. It will not do to sweep God's ability to heal miraculously under the rug by calling these texts old-fashioned. The God here described, and the God living today, is the same God. Yet, how shall we understand these wonderful deeds of God? Can we arrange a miracle for ourselves?

First of all, we should be clear as to the details of the accounts. Leprosy then was not defined with the medical precision of today. Commentators point out that Hansen's disease is not the ailment of these two lepers. Rather, there is agreement among scholars that the Hebrews tended to call ringworm, psoriasis, leucoderma, and vitiligo by this name. This "leprosy" was likely due to a fungus which attacked clothes and even walls of houses. It is plain from the treatment of lepers, who were never allowed into the house, that their disease was highly contagious, whereas Hansen's disease is not.

But whatever the disease of this leper, it is plain that he is seriously ill. And it's exciting for us to determine whether we can or cannot organize a similar miracle for ourselves. Is it still possible to screw up our faith to such a pitch that we can convince God to heal

us, or to heal someone close and dear to us? We must now become careful listeners to God's word, or else we will bring all to ruin.

We have with us a whole parade of people who claim to have the power to heal and work cures through faith. It may help to mention just a few.

Mrs. Elsie H. Salmon, wife of a Methodist minister in South Africa, many years ago claimed to have "healing hands." She reports in her book, *He Heals Today*, that she has treated successfully colitis, arthritis, deafness, dumbness, blindness, spinal trouble, paralysis, club foot, fibrosis of the spine, solidification of the spine, cleft palate, leukaemia, tuberculosis, polio, and cancer.

Mrs. Agness Sanford, born in China, the daughter of a Presbyterian missionary, tells of her cure of a Mr. Williams. "His heart had swollen until it filled almost the whole chest ... every valve had burst and was leaking like a sieve." After prayer she "could feel the heartbeats becoming more quiet and regular. I could even feel the strange inner shifting that reports the rebuilding of flesh and tissues." A doctor later confirmed her opinion that the heart had gone back to its normal size. She concludes, "In this case, prayer with the laying on of hands, was a specific remedy for a wrecked heart. If there had been no one to administer that remedy, Mr. Williams would undoubtedly have died."

Oral Roberts is widely known through his television programs. He has organized healing for gall bladder attacks, arthritis, cancer, rheumatic fever, asthma, paralysis resulting from polio, coronary sclerosis, varicose veins, tuberculosis, enlargement of the heart, and goitre.

The Roman Catholic Church also has its share of "faith healings." At Lourdes in France, at Fatima in Portugal, at St. Anne de Beaupre in Quebec, at St. Anne de Detroit, and St. Ann's in Chicago, you can find great collections of crutches, canes, braces, ear trumpets, and eye glasses as signs that cures have occurred.

The "snake handlers" of North Carolina and Tennessee believe, on the basis of Mark 16:19, that true Christians should prove their faith by handling poisonous snakes during services.

So we have a whole procession of people who have every confidence that a miracle is possible by arrangement. A certain person at a certain place, plus believing prayer, can bring about a miracle.

We should also note that miraculous healing is not a specifically Christian phenomenon. Christian Science is a Church that is on the

fringe, if not outside, of Christianity, and it centres on healing. The mother church at Boston has records of “cures.”

Yogis and Swamis practice “black magic,” and Voodoo is still supposed to be a potent curing force.

Recent research has indicated that health is closely associated with the “assumptive world” of a person. What is this “assumptive world”? Jerome D. Frank defines it as follows:

In order to be able to function at all, everyone must impose an order and regularity on the welter of experience impinging upon him. To do this, he develops out of his personal experiences a set of more or less implicit assumptions about the nature of the world in which he lives, which enables him to predict the behaviour of others, and the outcome of his actions. The totality of each person’s assumptions may be conveniently termed his “assumptive world.”¹

To put it briefly, all of us carry inside of us a picture of what the world is like. If what we experience and what actually happens are the same, we feel good. If they are different, we feel anxious, nervous, and weak until the picture inside us and the world around us are again brought together and harmonized.

For instance, there is an authentic report that 50 soldiers were suffering from an unknown affliction. It was a minor ailment, but the doctors were confused by it. Because of this confusion on the part of the doctors, 43 soldiers could not recover until the doctors told them that they had at last discovered the cause of their affliction and that they would soon recover.

In another instance, three women with very different problems (gall bladder inflammation, cancer, and a post-operative infection) were told that a faith healer would be praying for them at a certain hour, and all three made remarkable progress.

I am relating this to indicate that healing is closely tied to our own inner feelings, and that these feelings are powerful factors in achieving a cure. Much can be done by doctors, clergy, faith healers, revivalists, psychiatrists, and friends to affect these feelings, and help us to better health. Feelings can be influenced by our Christian faith and by a host of other factors.

What is important for us today, as we ponder this text in which a leper is healed, is that Christ has the power to heal. Also, within the leper, there is the strong conviction that Jesus is able to do so: “If you will, you can make me clean.” But there is an equally clear emphasis

that Jesus does not desire to be known as the great healer: “See that you say nothing to anyone.” Jesus does have endless compassion for us in our afflictions, but he wishes to be honoured for something greater than his healing abilities.

To listen carefully to the text means that we will hear what is more than curing a leper. As we have shown, cures of all sorts occur naturally and supernaturally, slowly and suddenly, with faith and without faith. (It is interesting to note that in 20 instances of healing in the New Testament, there are three cases where faith is entirely lacking [John 5:2-15, Luke 13:12, and Mark 5:25-34]. In three other instances it is not the sick person but friends and relatives who have faith, as in the account of the paralytic let down through the roof by four friends. At other times faith is very faint [Mark 9:23, 24]. Only in eight instances does faith precede the cure.)

Healing and arranging a cure are certainly important to us if we are sick, but if we are true to our text we will be moved to go beyond this desire to that which is greater. But what could be more wonderful than being healed of sickness? Why, being blind to the presence of God, and now seeing God!

What concerns Mark, and should concern us, is that this leper goes around telling everyone, “Look, I was leprous, and now am clean,” rather than, “Look, the Messiah is among us!” Of course, the man also points to Jesus as the cause of his cure, but healers had already been present, and would continue to be present. *Mark wants us to know that there is something more valuable than our health, greater than a faith healer, and more wonderful than a sudden cure!* God’s inbreaking into time by his Son, to forgive and to redeem, is much, much more!

But people then had trouble grasping that anything could be more important than their own personal and temporal advantage. You recognize that this healed leper is no longer living; he eventually died despite his cure. So also with the rest of those who were healed, and who will be healed today.

We are tempted to snatch from the hand of God some little gift that we see in his hand. But Mark, through this Gospel, asks us not just to grab some little advantage, but rather to put our hand in God’s hand, and walk with God in time and eternity. I wonder if we will hear the really great thing that is happening in our text as the leper is healed, or will the miraculous cure blind us to the fact that in Christ God does not only heal, but grants us the Kingdom!

We asked at the beginning, Can a miraculous cure be arranged? That is possible. What is not possible is to arrange membership in the Kingdom. That is a gift given through Christ. God grant you a healthy life, but, more importantly, participation in his Kingdom! Amen.

Notes

- ¹ Jerome D. Frank. *Persuasion and Healing* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), p. 20.