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Do you believe in miracles? If so, have you prayed for a miracle? Did you experience a miracle?

Perhaps the last question may be the hardest to answer. Some miracles may not immediately be seen as miraculous, but we may later recognize God’s supernatural involvement. In other instances, we may never realize the ways in which God intervened miraculously on our behalf. After all, “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Of course, God’s work isn’t always recognizable when we’re suffering. If we are “hard pressed on every side, but not crushed” (2 Corinthians 4:8), a miracle may be necessary to avoid being crushed. After hard pressing, however, we may not feel like we experienced a miracle even when we did.

My wife and I were married for a decade without being able to have a child. We prayed earnestly for a medical miracle, received anointing with oil, and visited multiple doctors. A church friend provided additional hope when she told us that God revealed to her that we would have a baby. That prophecy seemed to come true when a doctor finally confirmed a pregnancy, but a subsequent ultrasound revealed a devastating miscarriage.

We eventually pursued adoption. After two years of research, paperwork and financial investment, our miracle seemed to arrive when we got the call that a newborn boy’s biological parents had chosen us to become his forever family. We drove to the hospital and met the adorable boy whom we believed was our miracle. The next day, a phone call informed us that quickly shifting circumstances meant the boy would no longer be available for adoption.

When we later got a call from a different adoption agency about a baby boy several states away, I was skeptical. Space constraints won’t allow the details, but I now see the miraculous hand of God in the events that led to our son joining our family.

Our experiences do not negate the miraculous ways in which God physically heals other people of infertility. As Chuck White explains in this issue of LIGHT + LIFE, the New Testament includes examples in which one person miraculously received physical healing while another equally deserving Christian did not.

God’s ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8–9). His miracles are real even though they don’t always come in the ways we expect. As Carolyn Moore writes in Seedbed Publishing’s “Supernatural,” “Christianity is not a faith with a few miracles sprinkled in for effect. Christianity is a miracle with some good stories thrown in. Miracles are the cornerstone of the Christian faith. To extract them from the gospel of Jesus Christ would be to extract the heart of God for the people He created.”

Some Christians insist miracles ceased after the early church, but believers around the world testify otherwise. Other people claim Jesus as a great teacher, but they conclude a person would have to be ignorant to believe in miracles. C.S. Lewis — no intellectual slouch — countered, “Belief in miracles, far from depending on an ignorance of the laws of nature, is only possible in so far as those laws are known.”

According to 1 Corinthians 12, the Spirit of God gives some people “miraculous powers” while some others have the gift of “distinguishing between spirits” (v.10). The latter gift also is important because things may appear to be miracles without coming from God. The “man of lawlessness,” as described in 2 Thessalonians 2, “will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie” (v.9). Matthew 24:24 and Mark 13:22 also warn of “false messiahs and false prophets” performing “signs and wonders to deceive.”

Don’t fall for fake miracles. Don’t miss the real miracles either. +
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Raging Wildfires

By Bishop Linda J. Adams

As I write, hundreds of fires are burning out of control across the American West. Trying to capture the fury of these raging wildfires, reporters are using the term *apocalyptic*. It seems they’ve resorted to that term after *catastrophic* has been used so much we can’t hear it. What comes after *apocalyptic*? *Unimaginable*?

Bishop Linda J. Adams, D.Min., was elected to the Board of Bishops at General Conference 2019 after serving 11 years as the director of ICCM. She previously served as a pastor in New York, Illinois and Michigan. As a bishop, she oversees Free Methodist ministries in the North and North Central portions of the United States and also in Latin America.
All across the country, another wildfire is raging — not a physical fire, but a fiery blaze of incendiary rhetoric, and its path of destruction runs right through the church. Christian citizens, enflamed by passionate political and cultural views, are fighting one another in a war of words. Even among members of the same family or church, loving and patient conversations with those who differ have been replaced by verbal flame throwing.

These flames are fanned by social media, talk radio and cable news. The algorithms of social media are designed to reinforce whatever we have liked or shared, so we get more and more content that confirms our biases. TV and radio stations have learned that it’s more profitable for their advertisers if they appeal to one narrow slice of the ideological pie, so they often give their own slant exclusively. Truth itself seems to have been set ablaze, as some political ads are filled with blatant lies, convincing the gullible. In this toxic environment, people stop imagining that someone with a different view could even have a point.

Many of our churches are completely ill-equipped to handle the polarization we’re experiencing. We have usually avoided political discourse entirely, so we don’t know what to do as the flames have spread into our members’ lives and set them against one another. We grieve a generational and cultural divide and don’t know how to talk across the gap. Whether in face-to-face conversation or on social media, too many Christians are caught up in disrespectful name calling and angry judgment of one another.

The New Testament letter of James speaks directly to our moment:

“My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires” (James 1:19–20).

“Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless” (James 1:26).

“Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be” (James 3:5–10).

If James compared the tongue to a fire, which can be set ablaze by hell and can burn the whole course of one’s life, what would he say about the words we write? How we “speak” through our keyboards and smartphones with our fingers and thumbs? I think if he were alive to experience our current reality, he would declare that the principle is the same: human anger doesn’t produce the outcome God desires, and angry speech causes more harm than we can imagine. Untamed words, enflamed passions, cursing one another — these have no place in the life of Christ-followers. He would be as disturbed by what we write as by what his readers spoke: Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing! This should not be.
Becoming Firefighters

How can we change the tone and content of our communication before the fires devour all we hold dear? Over the years, our discipleship practices may have covered many important aspects of our lives — marriage and family, stewardship, marketplace witness, etc. — but not political discussions or conflict resolution. We don't know how to talk about this. We've not seen how working through disagreements might be used to deepen our relationships and enrich our life together. In the church, we've been better at avoiding conflict than at intentionally facing it.

We might begin by admitting an uncomfortable fact: Our deeply held biblical values don't all line up with one political party. To admit this is to lose the comfort of full agreement with either party and to make ourselves face complexity. We could start by arranging a dialogue where we listen while others who love Jesus but don't share our political perspective explain their convictions on debatable matters. During this exercise, we should heed James' admonition to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. We should begin the conversation by reminding one another of the Lordship of Christ and setting some ground rules for respectful disagreement. Motivated by Jesus' call to love God and people, we could create space for discussing how public policies might best address our society's problems in more than one way. It would require patience and sincere attempts at listening. It would call for people to be reasonable and open to the possibility of conceding some points along the way — so it would be a stretch! At the very least, if minds aren't changed on issues, hearts could be softened toward others who took the risk of explaining their convictions and listening to those of the others in their church family. We should bathe such exercises in prayer.

Finally, James reminds us that with our tongues we praise our Lord and Father. As the Great Disruption of 2020 has drawn our attention to calamities and crises of biblical proportions, may we not only look around, but look up. In times like these, the church needs to lead the way in pointing people to Jesus. Our privileged calling is to proclaim the wondrous works of our loving God and cry out to Him for justice and mercy to prevail in our world. We are to be peacemakers, prayer warriors and worshippers who choose blessing over cursing. With one voice, it's time for us to cry out, Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven! Under the banner of our Lord, may we declare the praises of the One who unites us, even as we walk alongside those who fly a different flag. Taming our tongues and dousing the flames in our small part of the world will preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.+
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Miracles and the Already/Not-Yet Kingdom

By Chuck White

Two men who worked for Spring Arbor University suffered severe closed-head injuries at about the same time. Both served the Lord and both had many people praying for them. One returned to work as a professor in a few weeks, but the other never was able to remember things well enough to run the food service. He survived but never was able to handle mental challenges again.

Why did God heal one but not the other? Each was equally deserving of healing and each had numerous people believing and interceding for him. Sadly, this case was not the first time God’s people were puzzled by God’s miraculous action for one person and His bewildering inaction for another. In Acts 12 King Herod murders James the apostle and then puts Peter in prison with plans to murder him after Passover. The church prays for Peter as they undoubtedly did for James, and God answers their prayers by sending an angel to break Peter out of prison. What made the difference between God’s decision to let James die as a martyr, and to let Peter go free? It certainly was not the great faith of those who were praying for him! When God answered their prayers and Peter showed up at the door of their prayer meeting, they thought he must already have been killed. “Since Peter’s dead, it must be his angel at the door,” they said.

No, there is no reason we can figure out why God chose to let James die and then to save Peter from the same executioner. The problem gets even tougher when we look at Paul’s life.
God used Paul to work many miracles. He says he did many signs, wonders and miracles, and he did them over a long period of time (2 Corinthians 12:12). So powerful was Paul that in Ephesus people collected clothes he had worn and gave them to sick or demon-possessed people, and they were healed (Acts 19:11–12).

Yet this same Paul, whose clothes healed people he didn’t even know, was unable to heal his fellow-worker, Trophimus, whom he had to leave sick at Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20).

It’s easy to think that because Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8) — and because this truth applies equally to the other two members of the Trinity — when God acts differently in different people’s circumstances, then the only thing that is different is the people involved. We know this is sometimes the case: In His hometown, Jesus was unable to do many miracles because His own people did not believe in Him (Mark 6:5–6). But blaming the victim is a dangerous business. We can’t see into people’s hearts and, as we saw in the case of Paul, sometimes God treats the same person differently. God rescued both Peter and Paul from death several times, but then delivered each of them over to be martyred.

These truths help us avoid the terrible mistake of blaming someone when God chose not to do the miracle we all had hoped for. I heard a story of a pastor who at his son’s funeral preached that someone (or ones) in his congregation was responsible for the child’s death, because they did not have enough faith that he would be healed. This awful accusation reminds me of pagans who consult a witchdoctor after a villager’s death to find out who put a curse on the one who died.

Rather than searching for a scapegoat, we need to remember that sometimes God answers prayer by saying, “No.” The best prayer ever offered by the most perfect petitioner received exactly that response. In Gethsemane, Jesus begged His Father to ”let this cup pass from me,” yet the answer was negative (Matthew 26:39-44 KJV).

Near But Not Fully Here

Another way to frame why God seems to grant some pleas and is silent regarding others others comes from the nature of the kingdom of God. Mark summarizes the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, saying He proclaimed the good news of God, “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15).

Notice that Jesus did not say, “The kingdom of God has come here.” No, He said it ”has come near.” Even though God Himself was in the world in the person of Jesus, He had not yet fully brought the kingdom. The word Jesus uses, eggízw (eggidzō), means that something is approaching, that it is near but not here. The phrase
New Testament scholars use is “already/not yet.” They say that with the arrival of Jesus, God’s kingdom — His rule in peoples’ hearts and over the earth — is already here, but it is not yet fully here.

The most obvious way that Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God but did not complete it was with His physical presence. Although Jesus could heal without being close to the sick person, He only did so twice (Matthew 8:5–13; 15:21–28). All the other times, Jesus healed with a word or a touch, and the person had to be in His presence. The four carriers knew that if their paralyzed friend was going to be healed, they needed to get him to Jesus, even if it meant ripping up the roof (Mark 2:1–12). Jesus healed many in Capernaum, but the next day He left to go to the other villages of Galilee (Mark 1:32–39). For that time at least, the miracles in Capernaum stopped. When Jesus came into the world for the first time, the kingdom of God came with Him, but in a way, when Jesus moved on from an area, it also left with Him too.

After Pentecost, when Jesus gave His Holy Spirit, it became possible for Jesus, through His people, to be present everywhere at once. God solved the problem of Jesus’ physical limitations by allowing Jesus to live in believers through the Holy Spirit. Because of the Holy Spirit, the power of the kingdom of God to heal the sick, free the demon-possessed, and even raise the dead, burst the limits of one man’s presence. But even the mighty empowerment of the Holy Spirit did not complete the coming of the kingdom. At the same time that Jesus explained how He would live through His disciples by the Holy Spirit, He also told of going to prepare a place for them, a work that He would not complete until He came back to the world again (John 14-17).

The New Testament uses two word pictures to describe the nearness, but not the hereness of the kingdom. The first is engagement, and the second is pregnancy. In John 14, Jesus describes Himself as a bridegroom, who is not yet a husband. The bridegroom goes to prepare a place for his bride. Then when he returns, they are married, and he becomes her husband. In Galatians 4:19, Paul likens himself to a pregnant woman who is in labor to bring forth her child. In each case something has started, but has not yet come to completion. Yes, things are already different, but they are not yet as different as they are going to be.

D-Day and V-E Day

In the 20th century, New Testament scholar Oscar Cullmann discovered yet another word picture to describe the already/not-yet nature of God’s kingdom. After he lived through World War II, he said that as Christians we live in God’s kingdom between D-Day and V-E Day. D-Day was when the armies invaded France, and V-E Day celebrated the victory in Europe the next spring. Yes, the allies have landed and are on their way to inevitable victory, but more men will die in the 11 months between D-Day and V-E Day than died in the more than four years before D-Day.

Because God’s kingdom is ejggizw, there is much fighting yet to do. Many battles must be fought, and not all of them will be won. Yes, the kingdom is triumphing: “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” (Matthew 11:5). But the unspoken message is, “You, John, will die in prison.” Certainly we will win the war, but we will lose many battles along the way, and there will be heavy casualties.

So we pray, “Thy kingdom come” (Matthew 6:10 KJV), knowing that it is coming.

“He comes to make His blessings flow, far as the curse is found” (“Joy to the World” by Isaac Watts based on Psalm 98).

“THEY KILLED THE MOST PERFECT MAN THE WORLD HAD EVER KNOWN IN THE MOST PAINFUL AND SHAMEFUL WAY THE WORLD HAD EVER KNOWN, BUT GOD TURNED IT INTO THE GLORY OF OUR SALVATION.”
But we know the kingdom is near, but it is not here. So we go on to pray, “Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” (Matthew 6:10 KJV).

We know God’s will is not always done here on earth. Sometimes sinful people oppose it, and other times evil demons thwart it. God wanted the Pharisees to repent and accept John’s baptism, but they resisted His will and did not obey (Luke 7:30). Paul wanted to visit the people in Thessalonica but Satan hindered him (1 Thessalonians 2:18).

Engagements end in marriage, and pregnancies end in childbirth. D-Day gave way to V-E Day. Jesus will return to establish His kingdom over every heart and heartland. The certain hope of victory enables us to embrace the “fellowship of His suffering” as Paul wrote from jail to the Philippians (Philippians 3:10 RGT). Because we know how the story will end, we can regard our unanswered prayers, our disappointments, and our pain as temporary setbacks on the road to glory. Paul described his afflictions including hunger, thirst, cold, betrayal, danger, beating, flogging, stoning, imprisonment and four shipwrecks as “light and momentary troubles” (2 Corinthians 4:17). Because he had his eyes on the prize, he could see the stumbling blocks as stepping stones.

So we pray for miracles. As the Israeli sign says, “We don’t believe in miracles. We depend on them.”

And we also remember the words of the three Hebrew boys as they faced the fiery furnace, “Our God is able to save us from it, and He will rescue us from your hand. But if not, we will not serve your gods” (my paraphrase of Daniel 3:17–18). “We know God can do it, but if not ...”

We know God does miracles, but we also know He Himself suffered, and He may allow us to become like Him in His suffering. And we know that whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s (Romans 14:8).

And we also know that in every situation, God is working for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28). Miracles show us the kingdom is near, and disappointments show us that it is not here. But we are closer every day.

The truth that God is at work in every situation for the good of those who love Him is so important that the Bible teaches it four times. The first one comes in the story of Joseph whose brothers hated him so much that they sold him into slavery in Egypt. Their crime against him began with slavery, which led to prison, which turned into power, which resulted in the saving of thousands of Hebrew and Egyptian lives during the famine (Genesis 37-50). In the end Joseph summarized the story when he said, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Genesis 50:20 NASB). Nehemiah repeated the lesson when he spoke of God changing curses into blessings (Nehemiah 13:2). Paul taught it twice, once in Romans 8:28 and again in 2 Corinthians 1:4 when he said that God strengthens us in all our troubles, so that we in turn can strengthen other people in any of their troubles too.

Obviously the greatest illustration of God turning evil into good is the cross. The worst deed that people ever did was when the best government the world had ever known joined with the most wonderful religion the world had ever known. They committed the single most atrocious atrocity the world had ever known. They killed the most perfect man the world had ever known in the most painful and shameful way the world had ever known, but God turned it into the glory of our salvation. Because the cross allows us to see God transforming the world’s worst into heaven’s best, we can face the “not yet” as more than conquerors, confidently anticipating the complete coming of the kingdom (Romans 8:28–39). +

Chuck White, Ph.D., teaches at Spring Arbor University. He has taught the Bible in 13 different countries. He has 14 grandchildren, and he has run 60,000 miles since he turned 40.
Some months ago I found myself doing a bit of research. You know what that means these days don't you? Googling! I was googling my way around the internet seeing what I could turn up about miracles. I clicked on the "images" tab to see what might surface in response to my "miracles" query.

As I scrolled, one image jumped out at me. The photograph captured the scene of a late evening winter landscape in the center of which stood a scaffold-like structure, perhaps 15 feet high. Affixed to the scaffolding was a series of all caps letters forming words, each letter formed by a series of clear bright lightbulbs. These beacons of light shining in the darkness formed a sentence so stunning it took my breath away. The sign said:

THERE WILL BE NO MIRACLES HERE.

The audacity and boldness of such a public proclamation scandalized me. It turns out the sign was one of six public announcements posted around the town of Stirling, Scotland, as part of an art project by Nathan Coley. The inscription, “THERE WILL BE NO MIRACLES HERE,” was taken from a 17th century royal proclamation made in a French town believed to have been the site of frequent miracles.

I can't get the sign out of my mind. It haunts me and yet in a good way. It has me wondering about things like — what if we had a similar sign on the front lawn of all of our churches that said ...

THERE WILL BE MIRACLES HERE.

What if we had such a sign posted in the front yards of our homes?

Let that settle over you a bit. I mean, why wouldn't we do such a bold and audacious thing?

WAYPOINT:

Let’s ask ourselves the questions. One of these signs (albeit invisible) is posted in all of our churches and, yes, over all of our homes. Everything we do and say communicates one sign or the other. Which is it in your case?

We tend to think of miracles as rare, exceptional and extraordinary happenings that defy the natural laws and normal order of things. We approach miracles as though they were exceptions to the rule. But what if this kind of thinking is exactly backwards. What if miracles were the rule and the absence of miracles, the exception? I guess the bigger question is what is our theology of the miraculous? Whether we have thought it through or articulated it clearly, we all do have a theology of miracles. Whether visible or not, each one of us has one of the two signs posted over our lives. Which is it for you: THERE WILL BE NO MIRACLES HERE or THERE WILL BE MIRACLES HERE?
“Miracles are not primarily designed to be proof for the existence of God. They are the practical signs of the in-breaking kingdom of heaven.”

It all depends on where your theology of miracles begins. Let’s agree that though we are prone to build our theology on our experience, we must begin with the Word of God. We cannot abide a theology of miracles built on our experience, no matter how full or how bereft our experience may be as it relates to the miraculous. Truth be told, many of us have an ambivalent theology when it comes to miracles. It’s more like, “There may be miracles, and there may not be.”

Let’s agree we will build our theology on the firm foundation of the Word of God. Here is where it will get interesting. For most of us, our biblical theology of miracles (and most everything else) begins with Genesis 3, the entry of sin into the world and the human community’s catastrophic fall from the state of grace. How might that change if we began instead with the beginning: Genesis 1.

I tend to be known as a master of the obvious insight. If our theology does not begin with what is properly, “the beginning,” it will never properly end with “the end.” If we begin with sin, we end with salvation. In this framework, eternal life begins with death and ends with heaven. While the plotline of the Bible is all about sin, salvation, death and eternal life, this plot is set within a larger story. On the big story, the Bible is unequivocally clear: the beginning is Creation and the end is New Creation.

What does all of this have to do with miracles? Only everything. Genesis 1 is nothing less than the grand exposition of the miraculous power of the Word of God. Into the dark, formless chaotic void, God speaks, “Let there be light,” and there was light. This creative wonder-working speech continued for six days, culminating with the miracle of all miracles, human beings handcrafted from the dust of the earth and the breath of the Divine in the image of God. This is the kingdom of God, on earth as it is in heaven, in all its miraculously glorious origins. Even more, the vision was for the whole creation to prosper and flourish, miraculously regenerating and reproducing itself eternally. This is the original vision and version of scriptural holiness spreading across the land; the earth “filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14).

Suffice it to say, in the kingdom of God, miracles are not the exception. They are the rule. At the center of the Bible lives a collection of prayers, so many of which are direct responses to Genesis 1 and 2, meant to constantly re-source and strengthen our faith in the original, miraculous order of the kingdom of God. Consider Psalms 8, 19 and 24 for starters.

WAYPOINT:

What do these three Psalms have in common? What do they teach us about the miraculous nature and capacities of the Creation (even beyond the Fall)?

Because sin is the great interrupter of the kingdom of God, we mistakenly understand miracles as exceptional interventions. Miracles are the rule. There is neither time nor space here to rehearse the miraculous unfolding of the story of God through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob or the miraculous story of Moses, the Exodus, the Law, the fire by day, the cloud by night, the manna, the water from the rock, the 40 years of the miraculous tabernacling of the Spirit sustaining the Israelites in the wilderness, or the miraculous movement into and settlement of the promised land, and on and on we could go. Everywhere they went, the Genesis 3 world posted a sign that read: THERE WILL BE NO MIRACLES HERE.
Yet throughout the entire story, from generation to generation, everywhere they went, they carried the sign of Genesis 1 and 2. It said:

THERE WILL BE MIRACLES HERE.

We must now get to the miracle of all miracles.

It is fascinating how the Fourth Gospel begins. Into the midst of the first century, a decidedly Genesis 3 epoch of world history, John calls us back to Genesis 1.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:1–5).

And behold the miracle of all miracles:

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Now, notice the first words of Jesus from Mark’s Gospel: “The time has come,” He said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15).

What is the good news here? How about “the time has come” and “the kingdom of God has come near”? Might repentance hold a richer meaning than just “believe and behave”? Might it mean something more like “realign your entire life with this new and now in-breaking reality”?

Now, watch what happens. By a conservative estimate, before the first chapter is done, we witness upwards of at least a hundred miracles.

**Miracles 1 and 2:** Two sets of brothers suddenly leave their well-established vocation as fishermen at the invitation of Jesus to “fish for people” (Mark 1:16–20).

**Miracle 3:** He teaches people in a synagogue with an astonishing transcendent authority, which amazes the people (v.21–22, 27).

**Miracle 4:** He confronts and casts out an impure spirit from a man in the synagogue (v.23–26).

**Miracle 5:** He goes to Simon and Andrew’s home and heals Simon’s mother-in-law from a fever (v.29–31).

**Miracles 6–101:** The whole town gathered outside the home and Jesus healed many who were sick and delivered many who were demon-possessed; shutting the mouths of the demons (v.32–34).

**Miracle 102:** Jesus wakes early, goes to a solitary place and meets with His Father, the God of heaven and earth (v.35–37).

**Miracle 103–142:** “So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons” (v.39).

**Miracle 143:** Jesus touches and cleanses a leper by the power of His word (v.40–42).

Indeed, before the end of the first chapter of the shortest gospel, we have already witnessed more miracles than we can count. In the on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven kingdom of God, miracles are the rule — not the exception.

It is as though Jesus carries a sign everywhere He goes that reads:

THERE WILL BE MIRACLES HERE.

I used to believe Jesus performed miracles like some kind of fireworks show — in order to prove He was the Son of God. I know better now. There was a much deeper agenda afoot. Jesus is restoring lost Eden. He is bringing New Creation, and it looks neither like legalistic religious fidelity to the rules nor deliverance from the empire of Rome. It looks like the famed...
highway of scriptural holiness described in Isaiah 35:

“Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert” (v.5–6).

Remember how Jesus responded to John the Baptist’s message from a Judean jail cell as to whether He was the one or should another be expected? Not yes, not no, but ...

“The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” (Matthew 11:5).

He cited miracles; miracles as reversals of the curse of sin and death; miracles as expressions of the New Creation; miracles as demonstrations — not of compelling force but of compassionate love — demonstrations of the kingdom of God.

Miracles are not primarily designed to be proof for the existence of God. They are the practical signs of the in-breaking kingdom of heaven. Miracles advance the New Creation mission of Jesus Christ. In the greatest sense, miracles are gifted manifestations of the holy love of God for the sake of His holy creation.

WAYPOINT:

There are three basic explanations as to why we don’t see more miracles than we do. 1. There is a deficiency in our biblical and theological understanding. 2. There is a deficiency in our discipleship and formation as relates to faith, hope and love. 3. The Calvinists and dispensationalists have it right and miracles (among other gifts of the Spirit) ceased with the end of the age of the apostles. Where do you land among these three alternatives? Is there a fourth or fifth?

Years ago when I lived in Wilmore, Kentucky, I saw an unlikely sign. It was the marquee on one of the local banks. Where it usually said something about their new interest rate on certificates of deposit or about getting an individual retirement account, this time the sign said something completely different. I will never forget the words:

WHERE THERE IS GREAT LOVE, MIRACLES ALWAYS HAPPEN.

The words hit me with the force of an ever-unfolding epiphany. I knew their truth to my depths. I had mistakenly thought of miracles in the category of power: a power I wanted to possess. Maybe the reason I had little to no experience with miracles was not because I lacked power (though I did) but because I lacked love. Instead of possessing miraculous power, what if I could be possessed by holy love?

The source of Jesus’ miraculous power was His powerful love. In fact, we might say His power was commensurate with His love. In Miracle 143 in the first chapter of Mark’s Gospel — the cleansing of the leper — we get these words:

“Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out and touched him. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be healed!’” (Mark 1:41 NLT).

The Greek term translated, “moved with compassion,” is transliterated as “splagchnizomai.” It means to be moved in your guts with the deep affection of love. I have come to believe we will do the works Jesus did and even greater works only as we are possessed by the greater love of Jesus in ever increasing measure. In fact, in the very next chapter, Jesus brings His entire message down to a single command to His disciples when He said, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:12–14). We will not do the greater things of God until we are possessed by the greater love of God. The sign proved prescient:

WHERE THERE IS GREAT LOVE, MIRACLES ALWAYS HAPPEN.
Might our ministry have fallen into a tired duty-bound ethic? Has “compassion fatigue” set in? Tired people tend to seek more energy or power rather than more love. What if our greatest need is a deeper, richer and more powerful doctrine of holy love (i.e. how high, wide, deep and long is the love of Christ)?

This is why bandied discipleship and the second half of the gospel — sanctification by grace through faith — and being “filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” matters so much. To become a church with miraculous capacities we must become persons of miraculous love, and there are no shortcuts to becoming this kind of person.

So where does this leave us and our churches with respect to miracles? The last time I checked, Jesus did not say, “I was” or “I will,” but, “Behold, I am making all things new” (Revelation 21:5 ESV). The Holy Spirit, the presence and power of God, indeed the flame of love, is now unleashed through our lives in the world. The time is still fulfilled. The kingdom of God is still at hand. The old order is passing away. The New Creation has dawned. The age of miracles is now.

What if we are at the end of a long period of history in which our part of the church has been asleep — not lazy or willfully unbelieving, but unaware and unattuned to the fullness of the possibilities of God for our lives and world? Wouldn’t we want to wake up?

THERE WILL BE MIRACLES HERE. It’s time to start working on our sign. I will be on the lookout, and I can’t wait to hear the stories.

Let us close this reflection with a prayer and a doxology from Ephesians 3. Here’s the prayer:

“I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (v.16–19).

Now the doxology:

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (v.20–21).+
Thank you to the more than 1,100 people who’ve joined the Light + Life Conversations group on Facebook since it launched at the beginning of the year. This is a moderated group for engaging and respectful conversations pertaining to topics covered in LIGHT + LIFE. Comments from the Facebook group may be used in this Talking Points section of the magazine. This issue’s comments relate to the “Above Board” theme of the September issue and the recent “Stand as ONE” message from the Board of Bishops, and we’re also including one comment received in September about the August issue on “Bridging Generations.” Comments on these pages may have been condensed or lightly edited for brevity, clarity and the magazine’s style guidelines. Visit fmchr.ch/conversations to participate in the discussion and to read all of the comments and their context.

**Comment of the Month**

As you look at the world in which we live, in the United States right now, around 85 percent of all Americans live in an urban area. ... Are 85 percent of our churches in the city? Cities are the centers of political and economic power. They shape the cultural values that are disseminated by the media, and the city presents the greatest challenge that the church has ever faced.

— Howard Olver, the Genesis Conference’s assistant superintendent of African immigrant ministries, during a live video interview in the Light + Life Conversations group.

**Jonathan Raymond** We love Howard [Olver] and admire his obedient faith ["Called to the City: The Urban, Cross-Cultural Ministry of Howard Olver" by Jeff Finley].

**Rose Brewer** The FM Urban Fellowship is part of what kept me FM ... because I saw people who were the real deal, doing real, deep, dynamic (not flashy) ministry. They are still some of my closest colleagues. ... If 85% of people are in the cities, it is not too expensive; it is not too risky; it is imperative to the church in the U.S. and around the world.

**Kristen Bennett Marble** How are we witnessing to the world that the gospel works?

**Lois Kiger** Thank you for this article ["What's in Your Hand?" by Alex Davis]. I remember being taught not to say anything if it wasn’t nice or necessary. I really appreciate the Scriptures you included. When it comes to the body of Christ, I also think of Ephesians 4:3, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

**Arlene Wilson Barnett** The heart is the only card I know. I pray that my heart will reflect the right characteristics in this game called life.
Patricia Hale Robey Thanks for writing this article [“Living in the Light” by Bishop Keith Cowart]. It needs to be read and re-read. Good truth.

Nelson Kwendanji Banda The gospel is working and powerful to those who believe and trust Jesus.

Karen Kinnaman What are some ways we can encourage ourselves and each other in how we engage in a Christ-centered way when we are communicating with others who may not necessarily agree with what we believe?

Charlie Shoemaker It first has to start with friendship. It’s hard to talk to your neighbor about Christ if you’ve never talked to your neighbor.

Bishop Keith Cowart We live in a nation that is clearly divided and in disarray. Our nation desperately needs a living example of a better way.

David Hamilton I so agree, Bishop Cowart, and sadly that division is very evident in our churches.

Jeff Finley As I share in the On Point article [“Secrets, Idols and Insurance”], my grandparents were concerned their Modern Woodmen life insurance might keep them from being accepted into membership in the Free Methodist Church. After all, the Free Methodist Church prohibited secret societies such as the Masons, the Odd Fellows, and possibly even the group behind the insurance. Why do you think the secret-society prohibition was a key principle of Free Methodism in past decades?

Edie Miller Reay Church business was being decided among those who were Masons bypassing the polity of the church.

Karen Kinnaman How can we, as Free Methodists, provide a living example to our communities to come together in unity?

Darren Anderson I think a much deeper and wider commitment denominational wide to plant and support multicultural churches is absolutely paramount! Learning, studying, growing and becoming known for that work not only lies within our denominational DNA! It also sets a high example for all of the community around it and leads simply by example. As more and more multicultural churches are growing not only in our inner-cities but also in our suburbs, it simply must become an essential part of our denominational lifestyle moving forward!

Charlie Shoemaker I think we need to realize how desperate the world is for something different and authentic. We need to go back to our roots of preaching/ministering to the poor. Demonstrating the love of Jesus in our communities (corporately and individually). And in everything we need to constantly point to Jesus.
The editor of this magazine visits a Chicago park and gets caught in the middle of a heated confrontation between police officers, members of the National Socialist Party of America (a neo-Nazi group), a Black teenager, and other protestors.

"Threats and obscenities fill the air," reports the editor who adds that he sees "racial hatred that far outstrips anything I witnessed" during a trip to apartheid-era South Africa. "I feel fear."

John "Ike" Owen:
Chaplain to the Cities

by Jeff Finley

"I was called to minister to the people that the police encountered — the voiceless, powerless people."
This may sound like a recent news report, but the year is 1978, not 2020. Editor G. Roger Schoenhals goes on to write about the challenges faced by the nearby Free Methodist congregation in a predominantly white urban neighborhood known for trying to keep out minorities:

“So what should the people of the Westlawn Free Methodist Church do? If they allow Blacks into their fellowship — or even perform a wedding involving Blacks — the community will express vengeance upon property and person. (This happened one year ago.) Some in the church feel strongly that they should not minister to Blacks lest they jeopardize opportunities for ministry to the community.”

Schoenhals’ account of some church members’ acquiescence to racism may seem shocking in a denominational magazine — especially a denomination with an abolitionist heritage. The story doesn’t end there, however.

“The minority — including Pastor John Owen — take the position that a conciliatory [to racist neighbors] posture is contrary to the spirit of Christ. They want to take a stand no matter what the cost.”

That pastor, John “Ike” Owen, only stayed for two years at the Westlawn FMC whose members had been threatened with firebombing (not an idle threat because the home of a local Salvation Army leader was firebombed) if the church continued its cross-cultural ministry efforts. After Owen’s removal, the church eventually closed.

“It closed because the church couldn’t come to grips with ministering to people of color,” said Owen, now the founder and executive director of the Crisis Chaplain Corps, during a September 2020 interview with LIGHT + LIFE. “I eventually was regarded as a troublemaker because I performed the wedding of a Black woman and a White police officer.”

That wedding fits with two recurring aspects of Owen’s more than a half-century of pastoral ministry — serving urban residents of color and also police officers (some of whom, of course, are police officers of color). E. Dean Cook’s book, “Chaplaincy: Being God’s Presence in Closed Communities” describes Owen as “one of the church’s pioneer police chaplains. His large frame and big heart have left a legacy of police and crisis ministry work across many states and cities.”

At an age where many people settle into retirement, Owen continues to follow God’s leading to serve urban residents and police officers. The night before his interview with this magazine, Owen unexpectedly served as a liaison between his immigrant neighbors and police.

Owen’s Chicago ministry was preceded by his time as a Free Methodist pastor in Minneapolis where he worked with people of multiple ethnicities while also serving as a chaplain for both the local Police Department and Minnesota’s largest mental health care facility. His chaplain work with the ‘Twin Cities’ diverse residents attracted some of those same people to the First Free Methodist Church — not only African Americans but also many Latinos and Native Americans. Owen noted that Minneapolis is among the North American cities with the highest number of Native American residents.

During protests three days after the death of George Floyd, the Minneapolis Police Department’s 3rd Precinct station was burned down May 28.

“The 3rd Precinct is where I got my start in the police chaplain ministries in the late ’60s,” said Owen, who worked with the area’s diverse residents and helped the department recruit African American and Native American chaplains. “You can’t be involved as a police chaplain without encountering all of the cultural aspects of our country.”

**Rural to Urban**

Owen said he has been given “an apostolic gift” to be able “to jump cultures.” He said he was “raised in a hollow in Appalachia on a crick [creek] bank with an outhouse and went to a one-room school, so you couldn’t be more rural than I was.”

He attended the Elmira (New York) Free Methodist Church, now known as Hand in Hand FMC, and he and his brother, Jim Owen, became friends with future Bishop Richard Snyder and his brother, Vernon Snyder. They formed a teen singing group and then went to Roberts Wesleyan College. He continued his studies at Asbury Theological Seminary in rural Kentucky. He was mentored by Gilbert James, a Free Methodist professor, who took some of his Asbury students in 1967 on a trip to Chicago where James gave the students different assignments.

“He assigned me to ride with police. I didn’t have a lot of interest in police necessarily,” Owen recalled. “I saw unbelievable corruption exercised on the South Side of Chicago.”
Among other things, he witnessed tavern owners and businessmen giving cash bribes and alcohol to police, who also had ties to prostitutes.

“I couldn’t believe what I was experiencing,” Owen said. “I said to the Lord, ‘If you ever give me a chance to have anything to do with addressing police corruption, I’d like to be able to do that.’”

Owen said that as he graduated seminary, “I knew I was called to urban ministry, but I was supposed to go back here to New York to serve.” However, doors closed in his home conference to urban ministry opportunities, “and in the providence of God, He called us to Minneapolis.”

His wife, Belva, worked either 3–11 p.m. or 11 p.m.–7 a.m. shifts as a Veterans Affairs nurse, and the young pastor decided that as “my [church] people went to bed, that’s when the city came alive.” He would watch television reports of nighttime crime and think, “Who is with these people who are suffering these experiences of domestic abuse or shootings or fires? ... Who’s winning them to Jesus?”

He started by carrying a portable police scanner in his car and heading to the sites of police calls. Owen one night delivered cake and tea to the 3rd Precinct police station. No officer wanted to touch the cake or tea until one older lieutenant finally said, “Come on in, John. I’ll eat some of your cake.” Owen later learned the officers previously were the victims of a cake spiked with a laxative.

“I learned from that experience that they’re just like us; they have to trust you. That began my involvement with them, and pretty soon they started asking me to ride with them,” said Owen, whose first Minneapolis ride-along was with a Black officer and his White partner.

The chaplaincy program took off, and Owen’s efforts were documented as part of the book “Miracle at City Hall” by Al Palmquist with Kay Nelson. The Minneapolis program became the model for police chaplain programs across the country. Owen traveled in 1973 to Washington, D.C., to meet with other chaplains for the founding of the International Conference of Police Chaplains that he served as its first treasurer.

The chaplaincy program took off, and Owen’s efforts were documented as part of the book “Miracle at City Hall” by Al Palmquist with Kay Nelson. The Minneapolis program became the model for police chaplain programs across the country. Owen traveled in 1973 to Washington, D.C., to meet with other chaplains for the founding of the International Conference of Police Chaplains that he served as its first treasurer.

The following year, Owen was one of the urban pastors who participated in the Free Methodist Church’s first Continental Urban Exchange (CUE) at the International Friendship House in Winona Lake, Indiana, where the denomination had its headquarters at the time. He credited the efforts of Charles Kingsley, then the director of the denomination’s Christian Witness Crusades, who “in all of his travels found us urban pastors. He knew what we were doing. He knew that we were living out the gospel. He saw us in our context.”

He became a regular participant in future CUE gatherings that eventually led to the formation of the Free Methodist Urban Fellowship. Owen acknowledged that he and the other urban pastors didn’t always see eye to eye with denominational leaders, such as when a list named the “top 10 churches,” which primarily were located near the denomination’s colleges and universities. Owen explained, “We said it’s absolutely reversed. The top 10 churches are in Buffalo and in Minneapolis and in Chicago and in all these places where nobody recognizes them as the authentic church. We’re multiethnic. We’re multicultural. We’re primarily focused on the poor — not the rich and highly educated.”

Owen, of course, isn’t opposed to the churches near educational institutions. In fact, he served for a year as an associate pastor for youth and families at the First Free Methodist Church next to Seattle Pacific University. He said with a laugh, “I was the oldest youth pastor the congregation ever had.” He emphasized intergenerational connections and outreach to local schools and the Union Gospel Mission.

Capital Calling

After serving as a pastor in Buffalo, New York, Owen found himself without a church appointment, and he became the chaplain for the Erie County Sheriff’s Office. Meanwhile, he became increasingly burdened that Free Methodist ministry had ceased within the nation’s capital.

“Instead of following through with what we were called by B.T. Roberts and the Lord Jesus Christ, to reach the oppressed and the different, we took off and we left,” he said.

The Owens moved to Washington, D.C., in 1997 to begin a chaplain ministry that would revive Free Methodist outreach in the capital city. They were able to rent a house (which they later bought) in a predominantly Black neighborhood from Hubert T. Bell, an African American man who served as an assistant director of the U.S. Secret Service and later as the inspector general of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.
A mutual friend recommended Owen contact Lloyd John Ogilvie, who served as the chaplain of the U.S. Senate. Owen met with Ogilvie who asked how he could pray for him, and Owen replied that he needed an office.

“He prayed with me that God would give me an office. The next day I get a phone call from the United Methodist Church saying, ‘We’re giving you the top floor of the United Methodist Building’,” Owen said. “God just did wonderful things to open doors.”

The United Methodists allow several other denominations to use space in the building. Owen had complimentary use of an office suite overlooking the U.S. Supreme Court plaza and the U.S. Capitol. He befriended the officers protecting the Supreme Court and the Capitol Building. When a Supreme Court police officer died unexpectedly, another officer asked if Owen could serve as the chaplain for the court police officers.

“They didn’t even ask me. They just made me their chaplain, so I met with Chief Justice Rehnquist, told him what I was doing, and he said, ‘Good,’” said Owen, who had sidewalk conversations with another Supreme Court justice and members of Congress — some of whom had apartments in the United Methodist complex. “But I wasn’t called there to minister to them. I was called to minister to the people that the police encountered — the voiceless, powerless people.”

When he arrived in D.C., only two of the capital’s multiple law enforcement agencies had chaplains, but Owen said, “God allowed others to get involved, and He helped use me to do it.” The different agencies now have their own chaplains.

He saw ministry opportunities decrease as security restrictions increased after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. In 2003, the Owens returned to New York where he provided chaplain services to the New York State Police.

At General Conference 2019, Owen received the Chaplain Medallion Award in recognition of 55 years of ministry as a pastor and police/crisis chaplain.

Whether preaching in the pulpit or sharing the gospel with protestors outside the Supreme Court, Owen has followed God’s call to serve our nation’s cities.

“I believe I am and was called of God to be an urban pastor. All of the places I’ve been sent by God in the church are places that are in crisis.”
My work with the Immigration Alliance recently connected me with Linda Rigby from Cape Coral Community Church, a Free Methodist congregation in Florida. Linda and her husband, David, the church’s lead pastor, emigrated from Canada in 1995 along with their three daughters. In 2017 the church opened the Community Bridge, an approved and certified Immigrant Legal Clinic that offers assistance to low-income families and/or individuals eligible for an immigration benefit.

Read on for Linda’s miraculous immigration interview testimony. Learn why her church opened a legal clinic and what has helped her connect with immigrants. My conversation with Linda brought to light many practical ways to support immigrants, even during COVID-19.

Emily: As an immigrant and a Christian seeking to share God’s love with other immigrants, could you share an inspiring story?

Linda: The story is my own immigration interview story from July 2019. This is a story that I often share with others preparing for the interview to emphasize how important it is to pray and ask for prayer when in this process.

I had been a “permanent resident” for about 24 years and decided to become an American citizen. I received notice for my interview. However, leading up to the interview, I became very sick and weak. I was so worried about the civics test especially because I was certainly off my game.

We arrived early (as is recommended). However, we were told that we were too early and had to wait. All this time I was feeling just horrible. There were television screens all around the room with the civics test questions and answers being shown continually, and, as I watched them, I began to get confused on what I had studied and fear began to take over. I started to pray, and the lines of the popular

“There were so many people in our community that needed help. People were having difficulty with the forms, not knowing where to go, not knowing the language.”

— Linda Rigby

Photo courtesy of Linda Rigby
song came to my mind — “Fear Is a Liar.” I started to say these words over and over in my mind and then softly in a whisper. “Fear, you are a liar. Leave me alone. Fear you are a liar.” Well, God heard me, and I suddenly had a peace come over me, and all those feelings of fear just left, and I sat there calmly waiting my turn.

Suddenly a man came through the door who had never appeared previously and called my number! “Where did he come from?” I thought.

Anyway, I followed him, apologized for hardly having a voice at all, and went into his office. He was so kind. He asked me a few questions about myself, took my picture, etc., and then said, “Let’s do this little test. Who is the president?” All right. President Trump. “Where is the capital of Florida?” Tallahassee. “When do you have to file income taxes?” April 15. Then he said. “Oh, you know this stuff. You’re good.” I know I was shocked, and I remember thinking: Lord, this is so easy! He then closed my file and said, “You will be getting a notification for your swearing-in ceremony in about a month.” He told me how nice it was to meet me, shook my hand and walked me out of the room to the entry.

I believe with all my heart that man was an angel. He was not in the rotation of other immigration interviewers that day while I waited from 1 p.m. until 4:20 p.m. In his presence, all my symptoms of illness were gone, and the ease and miracles of my interview were unparalleled.

I was sworn in as an American citizen Sept. 13, 2019. All glory be to God.

Emily: Why did your church open a legal clinic?

Linda: There were so many people in our community that needed help. People were having difficulty with the forms, not knowing where to go, not knowing the language. We felt that there was an opportunity to minister to our community.

Emily: What has helped you connect with immigrants?

Linda: Our experiences as immigrants have helped us relate to other immigrants. Shortly after we moved to the USA, my grandmother died. We were very close and I wanted to go to her funeral, but I could not go because our paperwork had not yet been finalized. We could not cross the border. It was a very sad experience, yet it is one that I often share with immigrants who are new to America.

Emily: How has COVID-19 impacted immigrants in your community?

Linda: Right now my three adult daughters are in the process of getting citizenship. They have all used the Community Bridge. Due to COVID-19, their LPRs [lawful permanent resident status] expired before their citizenship could be finalized. Therefore, they had to pay to renew their LPRs in addition to paying for the process for naturalization. Additionally, the limbo has created stress. Not knowing when the next step will take place is difficult.

Prayer + Practice

Linda’s story reminded me of two ways we can, right now, support immigrants. Many immigrants are on the cusp of citizenship; however, their process has been paused, postponed and extended. If you know an immigrant in this process, call them and pray with them. Keep in touch with them and continue to pray for them. Offer to help them practice the questions for their exam. These are all things that you can do with as much social distancing as is needed. Anyone can do this. You do not have to be licensed, recognized or experienced.

Emily Fontenot is the communications director for the Immigration Alliance of which the Free Methodist Church – USA is a founding member. She has a balanced mixture of professional experience in nonprofit management and personal experience in church-based multietnic ministry. She originally wrote this article for the alliance’s blog from which it is republished with permission.
Are You Prepared To Leave a Legacy?

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Isolated No More
Cards As Handheld Miracles
By Susan B. Cella

When was the last time you received a card in your mailbox?

No, not your computer mailbox. I’m talking about handwritten, pen to paper, tucked in an envelope with a stamp in the corner — not a bill or junk mail! Was it a caring personal card, the very best and “rightest” kind of mail, that pumped a smile into your soul?

We need to bring back this artful form of communication — especially now as we shelter in place and seek socially distant ways to “encourage one another and build each other up” (1 Thessalonians 5:11). Values and lifestyles have changed along with countless comforting aspects of home life. Many were already gone before the pandemic. Now, stuck at home, many of us can see how empty our homes and our souls are.
We’re told in Hebrews 10:24–25 to “consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” While “meeting together” may not be possible right now, cards allow us to fulfill the passage’s instruction to be “encouraging one another.” Greeting cards can be a gentle tonic, giving us a taste of the community we long for. Both sender and receiver take in a drop of enrichment as “whoever refreshes others will be refreshed” (Proverbs 11:25).

Here’s how to get this out of the dream and into the stream of doing. You can buy a card, or a box of cards, or you can handcraft a card.

Buying a card can be a sport. I had a beautiful, white-haired friend, Anna, who was a master at finding exactly the right card. I miss her dearly since she passed away recently. I miss her cards too (and the many delightful days of anticipating them before birthdays and Christmas). Anna was a one-card shopper on a glorious treasure hunt. She told me once, with a gleeful smile, how she reveled in the search, until the moment when she said as she snapped her fingers, “There! Perfect!”

You can plan ahead and search for many cards on the same trip or, especially in pandemic times, online. Or you can buy a couple of boxes of cards. I keep on hand a box of blank cards and one of mixed occasion cards. Though pre-messaged cards are not always as personal as I would like, I can add a handwritten personal note, and I don’t need to run out and buy a card if the time is short as in the case of an almost-forgotten birthday or a sudden death.

Next comes the handcrafted card. I have a friend who may take up to six hours to create one fantastic card worth framing. My cards are quite simple. They take a bit of pleasant musing but not a lot of time. I keep on hand a supply of old holiday and birthday cards, photos, rubber stamps, ink pads, calendar pictures and sayings, scriptures and other words of wisdom. I also have a supply of postage stamps, tape, glue, ribbons, scissors, stickers — and the confidence that very simple is very good because I am sending love. I’ve found that creating a card can be relaxing and restorative like a mini-retreat on a hectic day.

So now you’re ready to begin. Your card is staring at you from your writing space. You sit down and pick up your pen. What do you write first? Trust me in this. The first thing you write is the recipient’s name and address on the envelope, and your return address in the top left-hand corner. Then, immediately place the postage stamp in the top right corner. Doing those three little things first (no matter how tedious it might be to find your grandmother’s new assisted living address) will be the thing that ensures your card actually gets mailed. Saving these steps for “later” may mean that “later” never comes — until it becomes ill-timed to send it at all. This disappointment could stop you from trying again, while a mailed card brings the satisfaction that you followed through and expressed your care. It feels good!

Now for your written loving thoughts.

If your card came with a message printed inside, that may be all that’s needed. Add the personal note if necessary. Always meet the person you are writing to, kindly but squarely, where the relationship really is. This will take common sense. Enjoy thinking it through for clarity, then write accordingly.

If you are thanking a first date for a lovely outdoor dinner (which easily takes a reconnaissance mission to find in these times), express gratitude without gushing or imagining that you are engaged. (It could be your first and only date if you don’t get this right.)

Realize the importance of remaining focused on why you are writing. Thank you? Encouragement? Birthday? Just a hello? Stick to that, and the appropriate brevity, which is the nature of a card, will follow. (It is not good to remind your sister in her birthday card that she needs to return the jacket she borrowed.)

Add the date to the top right-hand corner. At the bottom, write your closing regards, a comma and your name. “Love,” “Warm regards,” “Yours truly,” and so on are best chosen by thoughtfully considering the type of connection you have with the person. “Sincerely,” has stood the test of time. When in doubt, use it.

Jesus commanded us to “love each other” (John 15:12). Sending a card may seem like a small thing to do to express our love. It is! But its impact could appear as a handheld miracle to an isolated loved one. Plus, the recipient can read it again and again, and treasure it as a reminder of your care.

I now lean toward a special card as a gift for someone in the hospital, assisted living, or rehab. Aside from being an ongoing encouragement when visits are now restricted, a card is easier to carry home than many other gifts. And who wants to steal a card?

Now that you’ve thought through the type of card, the relationship, the purpose for writing, and keeping it to the point, you are on your way to blessing the receiver, and yourself, by unmasking social distancing with the loving touch of a card. “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Romans 14:19).

So why not go for it? Write away.
WHAT DID YOU THINK I SAID?

By Brett Heintzman
Have you ever been frustrated because someone misinterpreted what you said?

Bugs Bunny, in the classic animated cartoon "Forward March Hare," is a prime example. "I want every one of them chickens cleaned and dressed for the officers' dinner dance tonight," says the sergeant, to which Bugs replies with a salute, "Aye aye, sir!" Cut to the next scene where Bugs enters the sergeant's office and proudly proclaims, "The chickens is ready, your honor. All cleaned and dressed for dinner, sir." Now wait for it. The shot expands to reveal an entire yard full of chickens elegantly clad in tuxedos and top hats.

The sergeant did say to dress them for dinner, right? Jesus said, "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19a), yet we've put tuxedos and top hats on many a chicken in our response. We think we know what Jesus meant, but there really is only one example to follow, and that is how Jesus discipled the twelve. What Jesus did with twelve ordinary men was miraculous. Well, actually it was normal in discipleship standards. Consider that, as the twelve heard Jesus tell them to go and make disciples, they would have had only one method by which to base their obedience: their own discipleship.

Let's put ourselves in the three-year discipleship plan of the original twelve and consider what ministry looked like for them as a result. They were drawn into the miraculous. Almost immediately they began to witness miracles and then were sent to perform them. Friends, if the miraculous was the thread running through the three-year plan of discipleship for the twelve, how would they have viewed discipleship any differently for those they discipled?

Somewhere along the way we veered off the path of the miraculous restoration of broken people, healing of the sick, providing sight for the blind, and opening the ears of the deaf for educational and fellowship experiences that revolve around a culture of church gathering. Somehow we began to see miracles as a benefit of membership for those in the church rather than a splashing of heaven on the landscape of a broken earth.

Where there is much brokenness, there is much opportunity. Disciples see this and hunger for restoration and reconciliation to replace decay and division. Disciples set aside their own comfort for the peace of others, wear the chains of prison for the freedom of others, and endure scorn for the glory of Christ Jesus. Let's consider three things to lay down — things that are likely barriers to our full participation as disciples of Jesus that mirror the lives and actions of the twelve — and three things to take up — redefinitions of what Jesus meant discipleship to be.

**Lay down your life.** Be willing and open. Remember that you are a living sacrifice. Confess that your life is not your own, that you were bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:20). Present yourself to God as an instrument to be used in the ways of God's choosing.

**Lay down your needs.** Seeking miraculous solutions for our own needs is often the shackle that restrains us from ministering to others. Pray for the Lord to use you to heal others even if your healing never comes. Pray to let miracles flow through you even if your own doesn't manifest.

**Lay down your church status.** Positions are nothing compared to being a servant. Put away your trophies and titles in exchange for a servant's heart. Ask the Lord to make you a servant of all even as He was a servant of all.

**Take up the role of a miracle worker.** Be a follower of Jesus. Read the gospels and place yourself in the stories. Walk with the disciples into the spaces where miracles happened and ask God to be a disciple as He intended.

**Take up the cross of the miraculous.** Miracles earned Jesus more disdain than accolades and so it was for the twelve. There is a cross of death hidden in the resurrection of the miraculous. Tell the Lord you are ready and willing to take it up and take it on.

**Take up the “loss” of heavenly gain.** He must increase; I must decrease (John 3:30). Tell the Lord you are ready to experience loss for the sake of heaven's gain.

Imagine the Lord's voice teaching you to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Now picture yourself in the home of a stranger, doing what Jesus asked of you as you heal a sick person with Christ's power and authority, explaining that the kingdom of God has come to that house. The dots connect. “This is what it means for heaven to come to earth! This is why we're supposed to pray in this way! This is what it means for us to be fishers of people — salt and light — a city on a hill,” you ponder with great mysterious delight.

What do you think Jesus said about miracles? About discipleship? About what He really asks of you and me as His representatives on earth?

His viewpoint is the only one we need.
ANTI-TRAFFICKING FOCUS FOR 2020

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