

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Aug 11th 2017

Memorial of Saint Clare, Virgin

How does faith grow? In today's first reading, Moses seeks to grow the faith of his people based on their shared experiences of miracles. Signs and wonders testified to the saving power of God, while showing that Egypt's pagan gods were no-gods. We marvel that these same people would worship a golden calf and need more hard lessons to correct them from serious wrongdoing. How is it that miraculous signs and wonders can produce a faith that is so tepid and prone to wander?

Miracles are never far from us. We are near to the 100th anniversary of Fatima, where apparitions to three young children were accompanied by a miraculous solar incident witnessed by over 70 thousand people. Many believed on account of these miraculous signs, and many more have deepened their faith from these accounts. Polling data shows that most of us have experienced a miracle or two -- something we could not explain from the parameters of the rules we have known and observed. But skeptics persist.

Miracles do not always generate faith that lasts. Gardeners among us might say that miracles are not "Miracle Grow." Perhaps the soil nurtured by those miracles was not that deep, or it may have been choked by thorns and weeds. The skeptic always has an escape hatch. Faith involves freedom to choose among different paths. Faith that lasts must be based on something deeper than a sign or miracle. We somehow grasp the reality that there is One behind the miracle whose presence endures, and we enter into a relationship.

Not all of us are wired in the same way. Experiencing the supernatural can indeed verify deeper truths, sometimes confirming a path we have navigated through reason (though we are still often surprised by mystery) or perhaps drawing us anew to something (Someone) greater than ourselves. Over time, we are drawn into a relationship and we adopt a way of living that cultivates that relationship.

The Gospel today reinforces this relationship building process. Jesus tells us that we must deny ourselves in order to follow him. We are invited to embrace a mystery that involves denying and losing in order to grasp something greater. The meaning of this mystery – and the nature of this denying, losing, and gaining – unfolds over time. The relationship involves other exchanges, too. Sometimes they come through reason, experiences in prayer, worship or the sacraments, or through inner confirmations that arise for circumstances and people we encounter. Eventually we are willing to go "all in" for this relationship, because we know it is as real as the rest of the natural world around us.

I do not fully understand the genesis of faith or why some do not have faith. I can accept that it is a gift, but since it entails a relationship, I can also accept that the gift needs to be nurtured and cared for. The sacraments, the prayers of the faithful, and the imitation of other saints can help us to keep the weeds at bay, add compost to our rocky ground, and help us bear fruit. When we witness or taste this fruit for ourselves, isn't that a kind of miracle, too?

Lord, grant us the courage to nurture our faith. Help us to see the miracles you are sending to us every day. May our brothers and sisters who struggle to find faith find rest, peace, and fulfillment in you.

Amen.

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