The sick cured. The lame walk. The blind see. The deaf hear. What’s not to like about a miracle? What’s not to like about a miracle story? Not much I suppose, except that in all honesty miracle stories make me – and perhaps you too – a little uncomfortable. While I’m sure those who are miraculously cured and healed must be overjoyed at the power of God demonstrated in their lives, most of us are all too familiar with times when the miracle we desperately need or want simply doesn’t materialize. Yes, we know all too well that the chemo isn’t always effective, the bones don’t always heal right, the child dies despite everything medical science can provide, the marriage falls apart, the career disintegrates, and the eyes give out. And so, miracle stories can be problematic.

Barbara Brown Taylor once even went so far as to observe that sometimes the miracle stories in the Bible may actually do more harm than good (Brown Taylor, Barbara, “The Problem with Miracles” in Bread of Angels, Crowley, 1997, page 136). And, I think she’s right. When we read about miracles but know that miracles don’t always happen, perhaps it makes us want to run away from God, or wonder, “What’s wrong with me or with God that miracle I needed, wanted, hoped for, prayed for, simply didn’t occur?” But, while miracle stories may be problematic, miracles were certainly a part of Jesus’ ministry.

By the time that the two miracles comprising the miracle sandwich of today’s scripture lesson occurred, Jesus seems to have acquired celebrity status. People were rushing to get to him, lining up just to get a glimpse. Like some people today wait on the sidewalk for hours just to get a chance to see the president when he comes to town, or as people will undoubtedly do when the Pope arrives in Philadelphia next month, so too it was with Jesus at this point in his ministry. He was the hottest ticket in town, and people were pushing, shoving, jostling for a position and a place. They wanted to hear his voice, and at least a couple of people in the crowd desperately wanted him to hear their pleas. These two may not have believed Jesus was the Son of God, but they believed he could do something to change their lives if only they could get close to him.

One of those in the crowd was a man by the name of Jairus. He was a leader of the synagogue, which meant that part of his responsibility was to make sure that all the religious laws were kept. That he chose to come to Jesus, and in so doing risked ridicule from friends and family, risked his position in the community and in the synagogue, is clear evidence that he was at the very end of his rope. When he elbowed his way through the multitude of gawkers and got face-to-face with Jesus, he begged Jesus to come and
cure his dreadfully sick, 12-year old daughter, a child who was at the junction between life and death. “Jesus, come, please, please, please come and make her well.

When Jesus heard his request, Jesus didn’t question Jairus about the illness or about his faith or his beliefs. Jesus didn’t ask about Jairus’ ability to support his ministry, or about his family’s lifestyle either. None of this mattered to Jesus. All that mattered was that there was a sick child. Jesus said, “Yes, I’ll go.”

But they had barely started traveling toward Jairus’ house with the crowd following closely behind, when an unnamed woman who was also at the end of her rope came crashing through the crowd. She needed Jesus. She needed him badly. As if to emphasize the seriousness of her need, Mark, who usually only gives us the barest of details, seems to linger on her plight. She had been bleeding for 12 years. She had seen many doctors. The co-pays and deductibles had bankrupted her. She had not gotten any better. She had gotten worse, in fact.

As a woman she lived pretty much on the margins anyway. But as a bleeding woman, she was really an outcast because anyone she touched would have become unclean and untouchable themselves until they had been ritually purified. Thus, no one, especially not a religious man, would dare to be near or to touch this unnamed woman. But she was desperate, and when she worked her way through the crowd and got close to Jesus, she reached out to him and touched his cloak.

Did her hands barely graze the fabric, or did they linger there? We don’t know. Did she grab a fistful of cloth or merely brush the hem? We don’t know. But touching his garment was enough. Enough for her. And enough for Jesus to realize that his power had gone forth.

Jesus looked around and said, “Who touched me?” It could have been any number of people – the crowd was thick and they were clamoring to get near. So the disciples were surprised that he asked who it was, and assumed it really didn’t matter who had touched his cloak. But to Jesus it did matter. It mattered a lot.

When the unnamed woman realized that Jesus was aware he had been touched and was looking for the one who did it, she figured she had better “face the music” and turn herself in for her having defiled a religious man. Ready for condemnation from Jesus, ready for Jesus to lash out at her, ready for harsh words, and perhaps even harsh actions, she said, “I’m the one.” But to her amazement and absolute astonishment, Jesus didn’t yell, didn’t even seem angry, but instead blessed her and gave the unnamed woman a name, “Daughter.”

“Daughter.” Jesus said, “Daughter, your faith has made you well, go in peace and be healed of your disease.”

Believing that he had healing power, she had clawed her way through the crowd to reach Jesus. And so, it must not have been a complete surprise when she discovered her hemorrhaging had stopped after she touched him. But her world was rocked when she heard him name her “Daughter”. She was, after all, a woman; a woman living on the margins of society; an untouchable woman living on the margins of society who had had just defiled the teacher with her touch. And yet he named her “Daughter.”

Her bleeding stopped that day and that was a miracle worth celebrating. But something even more miraculous transpired…the man named Jesus gave her the name, “Daughter.” That was a miracle even greater than the cure of her disease. It was one with life changing implications from that day and on through eternity as it marked her a child of God.

Meanwhile, while Jesus had been conversing with a woman he named “Daughter”, emissaries from Jairus’ house arrived and said, “Your daughter has died. Don’t trouble Jesus any more. We don’t need him any longer.”
Overhearing this news, however, Jesus said to Jairus, “Don’t fear. Believe.”

Believe that his daughter was still alive? Maybe. Believe that Jesus could do something to change things? Possibly! Believe that death was not the end? Conceivably! Believe that God would be with his daughter in this world and in the next? Mark doesn’t tell us what it was that Jesus was asking Jairus to believe. Maybe it doesn’t really matter. What’s clear is that even though everyone else believed it was too late, Jesus was determined to go. He was determined to be with that child, even though some said, “We don’t need you.”

When Jesus got to Jairus’ house, he was greeted by the paid mourners who had already arrived and were standing outside weeping and wailing. Jesus said to them, “Why are you creating such a commotion? The girl’s not dead, just sleeping.” At that moment the mourners weeping turned to laughter, their wailing turned to derision. “You’ve got to be kidding, Jesus”!

But Jesus was not deterred by them. He went into the house, took the child’s hand and said, “Little girl, get up.”

Now, what Mark doesn’t say here, because his first century readers would have known it well, was that touching a corpse made you just as unclean as touching a bleeding woman. So, for a second time on that day of miracles, Jesus willingly reached across the divide between pure and impure, between clean and unclean, to meet the crushing need of the world around him.

Little girl, get up. And, get up she did. Yet, not everybody gets up. Not everyone is cured. So there are problems with miracle stories. But, I think they also hold some possibilities too.

Taken as a whole, miracle stories tell us something important about God and about our world, reminding us that the way things are in this world is not the way they will be or the way God intends them to be. The 89 people who will die today in our nation due to gun violence? Not what God intends. Racism running rampant, creating pain and death? Not what God intends. No, God intends wholeness, healing, life. Miracle stories remind us of this. Miracle stories are a reminder that God’s will is not for pain, not for sickness, not for division; but for peace, and joy, and hope which might transform even the dire circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Both the 12-year old child who was cured, and the woman who had been sick for the entire time the child had been living, eventually died. We all do. And the reality of it is, Jesus never promises that every illness will be cured, that we will never experience pain, or that all the miracles we desire will come to fruition. And Jesus doesn’t guarantee that every tear will be dried. But miracles stories are a reminder that Jesus does offer to cross the boundary between heaven and earth and enter our lives; and as Rachel Held Evans points out, miraculously holding even the broken and sick pieces of our bodies and souls together in love, offering to give us meaning, possibilities, and wholeness, which quite frankly, is a type of healing that may transcend the curing of an illness. (Evans, Rachel Held, “Healing” in Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church, Nelson Books, 2015)

And, if Jesus offers us to cross the boundaries to reach us, and if he offers to hold the broken pieces of our bodies and souls together in love, perhaps we can offer that same miracle – those same possibilities of life and hope — in the hurting world around us. Perhaps!
Prayers of the People ~ Susan Moseley

O God, how many times have we said these words of the Apostle Paul: “In you we live and move and have our being”? Help us to know in the depths of our souls that you are our Source, our Healer, our Comforter, our Redeemer.

We come to you with thanksgiving for the good earth: for things great and small, beautiful and awesome, for seen and unseen splendors. We delight in the colors, flavors, smells, and textures that fill our senses. And today, we are especially moved by the stunning sounds of music lovingly laced throughout our worship. May such music continue to resonate in our hearts long after we have moved beyond these walls.

O God, we are thankful for the young: for their high hopes; for their search for truth and freedom. We thank you too for growing up and growing old; for wisdom deepened by experience; for work to do and strength to work, for rest in leisure and for time made precious by its passing.

Remembering that we are your hands and feet in this world, empower us to rescue those who suffer poverty or oppression. Open the ears of our hearts to hear their cries and quicken in us the fire to respond in love. And remind us, O God, that our journey toward racial justice and equality is not over… and that ALL lives truly matter.

Loving Spirit, we pray for those who suffer illness, distress or grief, and we ask you to touch them with your strong comfort and powerful healing.

We pray for our wounded environment and for those places around the world that have been ravaged by conflict and war. May those who govern the nations use their authority with wisdom, kindness and peacefulness. Awaken in them a thirst for justice that embodies your care for this earth and for the human community.

Receive O God our longing to love and serve as Jesus did. We pray that people may see in us the courage and the generosity that characterized Jesus’ life. May people see in us what we profess to have seen in him – the Spirit alive in our midst.

And now, enfold all our prayers into your sacred purposes. We ask this is the strong name of Jesus who taught us to pray, saying…

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.