

Rolheiser: Real miracles

Ralph Waldo Emerson calls the stars in the night sky “envoys of beauty, lighting the universe with their astonishing smile” and submits that if they appeared for a single night only every thousand years, we’d be on our knees in worship and would cherish the memory for the rest of our lives. But since they come out every night, the miracle goes mostly unnoticed. We watch television instead.

But, their beauty notwithstanding, shining stars are not the most prominent miracle which goes unnoticed. The greatest miracles have to do with gratuity, with love, with unfreezing a soul, with forgiveness. Our great poverty is that these go mostly unnoticed. There are much more astonishing things than the stars for which to be down on our knees in gratitude and there are more profound things to cherish in memory than a starlit night.

The Belgian spirituality writer, Benoit Standaert, suggests that the greatest miracle is “that the freely given exists, that there is love that makes whole and that embraces what has been lost, that chooses what had been rejected, that forgives what has been found guilty beyond appeal, that unites what had seemingly been torn apart forever.”

The greatest miracle is that there’s redemption for all that’s wrong with us.

There’s redemption from all we’ve failed to live up to because of our inadequacies. There’s redemption from our wounds, from all that’s left us physically, emotionally, and spiritually limping and cold. There’s redemption from injustice, from the unfairness we suffer ourselves and from the hurt which we inflict knowingly or unknowingly on others. There’s redemption from our mistakes, our moral failures, our infidelities, our sins. There’s redemption from relationships gone sour, from marriages, families, and friendships that have been torn apart by misunderstanding, hatred, selfishness, and violence. There’s redemption from suicide and murder.

Nothing falls outside the scope of God’s power to forgive, to resurrect and make new, fresh, innocent, and joyful again.

Our lives, to a greater or lesser extent, all end up incomplete, broken, unfairly ripped away from us, and causing hurt to others because of our weaknesses, infidelities, sin, and malice; and still, ultimately, it can all wash clean again. There’s redemption, new life after all the ways we’ve gone wrong in this world. And that redemption comes through forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the greatest miracle, the penultimate miracle, which, along with everlasting life, is the real meaning of the resurrection of Jesus. There’s nothing more godlike, or miraculous, than a moment

of reconciliation, a moment of forgiveness.

It's for this reason that when the Gospels write up the resurrection of Jesus their emphasis, again and again, is on forgiveness.

Indeed, Luke's Gospel does not distinguish the announcement of the resurrection from the announcement of the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness and resurrection are inextricably linked.

Likewise, in the Gospel of John, in Jesus' first resurrection appearance to the assembled community (with them all hiding behind locked doors in fear) he gives them the power to forgive sins.

The message of the resurrection is that a dead body can be raised again from its grave. But this isn't just true for our physical bodies, which die, but it's also true, especially, for hearts that are frozen and dead from disappointment, bitterness, anger, separation, and hatred. The miracle of the resurrection is as much about raising deadened souls to new life as it is about raising dead bodies to new life.

Despite being nearly overwhelmed by new inventions today, machines and gadgets that do everything including talking to us, in truth, we see very little that's genuinely new, that's not the norm.

Sure, we see new innovations every day coming at us so rapidly that we have trouble coping with the changes they are bringing about. But, in the end, these innovations don't genuinely surprise us, at least not at a deep level, at the level of the soul, morally. They're simply more of what we already have, extensions of ordinary life, nothing really surprising.

But when you see a woman forgive another person who has genuinely hurt her, you are seeing something that's not normal, that's surprising. You are seeing something that is not simply another instance of how things naturally unfold.

Likewise, when you see warmth and love break through to a man who has long been captive of a bitter and angry heart, you are seeing something that's not just another instance of normal life, of ordinary unfolding. You're seeing newness, redemption, resurrection, forgiveness. Forgiveness is the only thing that's new on our planet, everything else is just more of the same.

And so, in the words of Benoit Standaert:

“Whenever we strive to bring a little more peace through justice here on earth and, in whatever form, change sadness into happiness, heal broken hearts, or assist the sick and the weak, we arrive directly at God, the God of the resurrection.”

Forgiveness is the most astonishing miracle we will ever see or experience this side of eternity. It, alone, makes for the possibility of heaven – and happiness.