

Proper 24 Year C 2025

I've been the rector of this parish for twenty years... and believe me; I've seen some things. There was the time; on Christmas Eve; that we had a lightning storm, and just before the service that night, a lightning bolt zeroed in on the transformer in the parking lot, and we had to have the service with no power; no lights, but candles; no organ. And then there was the time a person showed up for some impromptu counseling in my office... and he preceded to remove his prosthetic leg. Once, there was a knock at the back door near my office; and there was an older woman with her adult daughter whom she said was possessed by a demon; and she brought her by for an exorcism. I've dressed up in drag as Julia Child; put on a crawfish costume, all for the cause. The things I do for Jesus! You can't make this stuff up.

Just this past Wednesday, Molly hunted me down to tell me there was a man in the office who wished to see me. He was well dressed, not a regular, not a person that had been living on the street. We shook hands, and I introduced myself. "How can I help you?" I asked. "Well, Pastor Flowers," he said. I'm here to pray for you." "Oh," I said, a bit taken aback.... "What's the occasion?" It crossed my mind that he was here to straighten us liberal Episcopalians out. Perhaps he had heard that we support the LGBTQ community; or that we had posted a Black Lives Matter banner after the death of George Floyd. But he said, "I'm retired, and the Lord spoke to me and told me that my vocation now is to travel around and pray for clergy." I decided I would trust his sincerity, so I said.... "Thank you... I need all the prayers I can get." So we went back to

my office. His name is Robert. He had a rustic rural drawl. He told me that he lived in Milton, Florida, to be close to his grandchildren. He said he had been praying for clergy for some seven years now. He'd been all the way to Tallahassee; and all over the Florida panhandle. This was his first foray into Mobile. He'd been as far north as Dothan. "My home town," I said. He said he'd been to little tiny churches, and to great big churches. Some pastors welcomed him; and some not so much. "Pastor Flowers; may I call you Jim?" "Of course," I said.... "Jim, may we pray?"

"Oh Lord, we just come before you to give thanks and praise for your Son Jesus," he began. "We just want to give you all the glory; we praise your name for the gift of life, and that you, Lord, call us to your service." He continued. He was sincere. He went on to pray for me: "Oh Lord, I pray for Jim who has given his life to your service; anoint him again for your work; raise him up without fear to serve your blessed Son. May the light in this place shine on the City of Mobile." I was strangely moved. "Oh Lord, we pray for a miracle this day, that someone who is cast down might be raised up; that your mighty hand make way for your grace and mercy. We know that you are a God of miracles. We pray for a miracle this very day."

At one point I thought... This really isn't my style... that most probably he and I would be miles apart theologically; but his sincerity was arresting; and after all, theology is mere speculation. He finished, finally, and I thanked him. We shook hands and he

made his way out of the building, got in his van, and disappeared into the eternal melee that is Government Street.

I sat at my desk pondering the experience; and the phone rang.... This past May I performed the wedding of the daughter of close friends we made while Katharine and I were in Austin while I was in seminary. We discovered at the wedding that Cynthia, our friend, the mother of the bride, was critically immersed in alcohol addiction. Her behavior cast a pall over the entire wedding celebration. Being a recovering alcoholic myself, I recognized all the signs; her utter despair. After we returned home, I had a long talk with Cynthia and her husband Patrick. I tried to encourage them to seek specialized help. A month or two later, she ended up in the emergency room with acute symptoms of withdrawal. She was admitted to the hospital for detox. Again, I tried to convince them that detox was merely a first step, that she needed the support of a community who tell the truth about their addictions; that healing takes time; and that one needs certain tools to manage the recovery process that, in fact, lasts a lifetime.

The phone rang, and it was a long-time friend of Cynthia, informing me that she was again in detox; that she and her husband had to cut short a trip to Europe because she had hit bottom again; withdrawal, seizures.... So again, I called her husband, who I suspect has his own issues with alcohol; and I called their daughter in Alexandria, Virginia, to express my alarm. I simply told them that I would do anything I could to

support them. Who knows... many alcoholics never take the step to get help, with deadly consequences. They are, suffice it to say, in a complete mess.

“Lord, we pray for a miracle”Those words were still ringing in my mind. Her healing would indeed take a miracle. And then I thought... a miracle is not a one-time flash of light, but a process... a persistent, and most often, arduous process. The mess, the complexities of life, are the fertile ground for miracles. In our reading from Luke this morning, Jesus tells his disciples of their need to pray always, and not to lose heart. That, I think, describes the process of miracle. Prayer, the art of paying attention, and enlightened action. Our words of support, our solidarity, and our presence; our very sacrifice for the good of the other are the stuff of miracle, the stuff of possibility. Miracles are the artifacts of possibility. Our sincerity to the cause of Jesus, that is to say, our loving our neighbor, is miracle in its becoming. Miracles are the fruit of self-less work... persistent selfless work. The truth is, our lives upon this self-sustaining planet is miracle unto itself. Death and resurrection; the gift of healing.... Ours is to name that reality lest we forget.

Our sincerity... our sincere commitment to the way of Jesus, I believe, can move mountains. Our solidarity in the faith can heal the wounded, bring peace of mind to the broken, engender well-being and dignity for the abused and shamed. It will take a miracle to set right the calamitous assault on our democracy; and thus we persist in sincerity to speak the truth into the brokenness of our world. The widow in our story

persists in her appeal for justice from the unjust judge... it is an appeal to power from the least powerful of the culture; a widowed woman... and yet it is her persistence that upends the intractable social rubrics of her world. Who would have thought? It is a miracle.

My brothers and sisters, our sincere persistence keeps open the infinite possibilities of God. How much more will God honor such persistence? Never lose heart. Pray for our friends, Cynthia and Patrick; pray for the poor and marginalized of our world; pray for those you love; pray for our beloved country... and in all sincerity.... Expect a miracle.