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“They were astonished at his teaching because he spoke with authority” (Luke 4:32).

When we contrast the reception Jesus received in Capernaum with his expulsion from his own hometown of Nazareth, we can only wonder what the difference was between the two communities. While Jesus works no miracles in Nazareth (and Mark’s Gospel says he was unable), he performs a dramatic exorcism in Capernaum and amazes the crowd with the power of his teaching.

The difference appears to be that the people in Nazareth did not believe in him because Jesus was too familiar to them. He was just the carpenter, the son of Mary, known to everyone, and they could not imagine him as anyone special. They withheld their faith, the one ingredient needed to empower a miracle. The reciprocity required for miracles becomes an important theme in the Gospels. How often Jesus tells people, “Your faith has done this for you.” Jesus inspires faith and initiates the healing, but the petitioners must respond for it to happen.

The exorcism Jesus performs in the synagogue in Capernaum reveals his authority over the underlying forces of fear and control represented by the demon in the possessed man. Jesus breaks the spell of bondage and sets the man free. The crowd feels the change in the atmosphere and is astonished.

It is one thing to heal an individual, but what kind of power is needed to change the larger culture of sickness that makes everyone feel helpless and trapped? What can break the spells cast by the demons of generational racism, xenophobia and gender discrimination that distort whole societies?

By his death and resurrection, Jesus released into human nature the authority to break the spell of selfishness and fear that has limited our capacity to respond to God's grace. Discipleship is a counter-culture within the larger culture that brings light where there is shadow, salt where there is blandness, and vitality where there is cynicism and ennui.

God's power to heal and to overcome evil is always present. The challenge is in our response, personal and collective. What is my responsibility to bring my gifts to build up communities of hope and encouragement? How can we restore faith in the power of prayer to open the door to God's presence and power in our daily efforts to change the atmosphere, to raise the quality of discourse, to be more inclusive? The question is: Will there be miracles in our town today?

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