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Larkspur, California  
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Luke 17:11-19; Mark 2:3-12  
“Surgery as Sermon”

My spiritual journey called partial knee-replacement surgery took place a month ago. It is history. In theological parlance, one might call it salvation history. I died to my old self and born to a new life. Thank God, an anesthesiologist controlled my death-like experience.

Of course, my surgery took place under a deep and painless sleep. It was a sermon, albeit with masks, scrubs, scalpel and an amazing surgeon and medical team.

During the diagnosis for the surgery, my doctor was curious as to what my title was. I said “Reverend.” I could have added Doctor. He disclosed to me that he was Episcopalian. Not only was he one of the best knee surgeons in San Francisco, recommended by his colleague and member of this church, radiologist, Dr. Jim Gorder, but he was a Christian to boot. I was in excellent hands.

The date for the surgery was set and on the day, my wife and spiritual partner, Suellen and I, drove to the hospital where I waited for my turn. Since my surgery was potentially the least complicated, I was the last operated on. Previous surgeries that day became more complicated after surgery had begun – and time dragged on.

I was a little worried since I wanted my doctor rested and centered for my operation. Finally, my turn came and after a conversation with the anesthesiologist, the doctor walked in and said, “Now for a sermon.” My immediate response was, “Yes, a good one.” I acknowledged his busy day and asked him how he felt. In a calm and collected manner, he said he was fine which I understood from a professional point of view. He was the pro and he would be ready and steady. I told him that I was praying for him. I planned to tell him that because I wanted him to know that prayer by the person on the table held him. Thoroughly bathed in the spirit, they wheeled me into the operating room.

In leaving Suellen, I said I would see her in a few seconds. That is how anesthetics work. One falls asleep and one immediately wakes up again although hours have passed. I wonder if it will be like this when we die. Absent from the body, immediately present with the Lord. I think so.

I was struck with my doctor's friendly remark, his identification with his patient, a pastor, in that he was about to preach his version of a sermon, thus, my sermon title, "Surgery as Sermon." I have already alluded to the primary dimension of going into the sermon as one person and emerging as another. Surgeons perform miracles.

When my doctor visited me later and told me that that surgery went exceptionally well, I told him that he preached a good sermon. A sermon is good news. His response was that one needs faith. Wow, this medical person, this highly skilled, scientifically trained doctor, affirmed faith for success.

Honestly, I did not expect this response. I *looked* at his knowledge and skill and he *affirmed* his faith. I look at the healing stories of Jesus and marvel at his faith and the faith of those he healed.

The doctor told me in effect that sermons are given by faith. Of course, we have knowledge and skill but the efficacy of sermons are those delivered by faith. Whenever sermons are given, we can expect transformation and healing. A person comes into church as one person and departs as another person. He or she changes in big and small ways.

Is a sermon a miracle? In a way it is. Post-op events placed a surprising nuance on the miracle that took place on the operating table. In both gospel stories today, Jesus instructs the one's healed to "...stand up, take your mat and go to your home," and "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

The miracle goes beyond the operating table. The day after surgery, a physical therapist visited me. She had me standing and walking in short order. After another night in hospital, I was discharged and the next day a physical therapist visited me at home. My daughter, Anna, was there as the therapist adjusted the crutches loaned my by a neighbor. The hospital gave me a walker.

I walked the length of room with the crutches and on my return; I raised the crutches in the air and exclaimed, "Look, a miracle, I can walk!" Appreciating my humor, Anna laughed. The therapist, straight faced and serious, said, "Not quite." That was the funniest thing I heard during the entire healing. "It's a miracle!" "*Not quite.*"

When Jesus said to the paralytic, "...stand up, take your mat and go to your home," he knew that the miracle was not complete. He ordered, I am sure, a first century equivalent of a physical therapist. In my exercises, I am stretching muscles that have not been used for 45 years. A paralyzed person does not do cartwheels the next day and neither did I.

"Not quite" hit me with bang a week later. I was bearing the weight of my body and walking comfortably and triumphantly when the weakest part of my body,

my left thigh and hip joint gave in. My knee was healing famously but the rest of my leg could not carry the new weight and alignment. Old wounds surfaced and said, "Not so fast." I was in pain. The therapist said I overdid it. One can be a Christian, walk happily, and triumphantly in one's newfound faith but old wounds have a way of coming back and dinging us, which means one's faith has to be nurtured and old wounds faced, massaged and strengthened in positive Christ-affirming ways.

When a sermon brings about change, it is not just a good feeling. It is encouragement from God to go back into the world with greater faith and with renewed energy to serve the greater good. A miracle is an inward transformation and an outward action. One is healed and made whole through faith and action.

Another aspect of this amazing spiritual journey was the role of prayer. Prayer is the backbone of my faith. Suellen and I prayed going in and coming out. I was conscious of your prayers for me. Thank you.

One of the most important prayers as indicated in the gospel story today is "thanksgiving." Ten lepers were healed and only one returns to Jesus to give thanks. Jesus is astounded and impressed. He says, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" The healed leper was a Samaritan.

Spiritual genius, Meister Eckhart, said that if all we did in life was to give thanks that would suffice. He stresses this to make a point but he knows and we know there is more to prayer than giving thanks. Nevertheless, practice giving thanks for a day and you will be pleasantly surprised. It is health for body and soul.

I shall now share my signature prayer for this surgery. I said it a number of times while waiting for surgery and a number of times since. It is written by Presbyterian pastor and poet, J. Barrie Shepherd, from his book, *Diary of Daily Prayers*, found in *A Book of Reformed Prayers*, by Howard L. Rice and Lamar Williamson, Jr. editors.

The prayer is called, "With Me, Lord."

"Before I awaken this morning  
 you are with me, Lord,  
 and even as I open my eyes  
 you greet me with the gift of this new day.  
 May I take this certainty of your presence  
 with me into all this day can hold.  
 Be with me now as I go forth –  
 not as some weird

and ghostly watcher-over-me,  
but as a deeper and truer awareness within:  
an awareness  
which is constantly  
opening my heart to trust,  
to hope,  
to sharing and giving,  
to the call of the needs  
of my fellow-creatures;  
an awareness  
which is constantly  
opening all of my senses  
to the hidden joys,  
the tiny discoveries,  
the lesser celebrations  
and the over-arching wonder  
of your gift of life.”

Finally, I became conscious during a post-op meditation with Mark Nepo in *The Book of Awakening* that healing consists of one's relationship to all of life. We cannot divorce the wound from the body and we cannot divorce the body from the earth and universe. Nepo quotes John Welwood who says, "...Sit down wherever you are/And listen to the wind singing in your veins." I took aspirin twice a day to avoid blood clotting. It was great that the wound and its effects were treated; it felt better when I exercised my whole body to strengthen every part, and it was even greater to imagine the wind singing in my veins. John Muir said, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe." I like to think that my healing connects with the Lord of life and contributes to the healing of the world.

There it is, surgery as sermon; and I am grateful. Amen.