

“The First Step”
John 4:46-54; II Kings 5:9-14

On a Sunday morning, at Disney World, when my son, Zach was about ten years old, he woke up sick. The words ill and vacation were synonymous with Zach. It felt like anytime we left home, Zach got sick. To this day, Zach has medical files scattered at emergency rooms and pediatricians’ offices in such diverse locations as Myrtle Beach, Orlando, Honolulu, and Edinburgh, Scotland.

There was some speculation that Zach’s illness could be precipitated by the knowledge that whenever we were at Disney World, if it was Sunday, we would attend the ecumenical worship service held over by the Polynesian Resort. The crowds were always small, the retired preacher boring, and as you sat there during the sermon you could see in the distance all those people having a good time riding Space Mountain.

But, on this morning, Zach’s defense consisted of a high fever, sore throat, stopped up nose, listlessness, and other assorted symptoms. We believed it was likely just a virus, but the high fever gave us concern. So, where do you go for medical help in a strange town on Sunday morning?

One option was to call Zach’s pediatrician, Vernon Anderson. A member of the church, and a wonderful person and doctor, I knew Vernon would be helpful. But I also knew Vernon wasn’t on call. And who likes to be forced into a work situation when they are off, especially on a Sunday morning? For me to call him, at home, on Sunday, would be presumptuous and taking advantage of my position as his pastor.

So, what did I do? I called him. As always, Vernon was gracious, kind, and knew what to do. I would have never disturbed Vernon for myself. But when it comes to your children’s well being, pride and etiquette go out the door.

Our scripture this morning begins with a man whose child is sick, and he desperately seeks the aid of Jesus. Jesus has returned to Cana, where he turned water into wine. He receives a warm welcome, not only because of the wine incident, but all have heard of the wonders he worked in Jerusalem. One who has especially noted Jesus’ arrival is a royal official from Capernaum, a town about twenty miles from Cana. Likely, this man was connected to the Jewish king, Herod Antipas. But, we do not know if he was a Jew or Gentile. This official journeys the twenty miles from Capernaum in order to find Jesus and begs him to return with him and heal his son who is about to die.

Jesus says, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” Now, we do not know if Jesus uttered these words to the official or to the crowd. If directed to the official, they sound a little harsh. It doesn’t feel like Jesus is epitomizing the best in pastoral care.

But if the statement is directed to the official, he does not allow it to divert him from his purpose. “Sir,” he says to Jesus, “come down before my little boy dies.”

To which Jesus replies, “Go; your son will live.”

Verse fifty then says the man believed the word Jesus spoke to him and headed back home. And the story concludes as the official nears home being met by his servants, who tell him his son is alive. When he inquires the time the boy recovered, he is told it occurred at one o’clock the day before. Realizing this was exactly when Jesus said, “Your son will live,” the father and his whole household become believers.

Baseball great Willie Mays had a disappointing start in the Major Leagues. In his twenty-six times at the plate, he had only one hit. Eventually, the disappointment got to Mays, and as he was sitting in the dugout one day, he started crying. Mays thought no one was around, but his manager, Leo Durocher, heard him. Putting his arm around Mays, the manager asked, “What’s the matter, son?”

“I can’t hit up here,” Mays replied. “I belong in the minor leagues.”

Durocher simply replied, “As long as I’m manager of the Giants, you’ll be my center fielder.”

Mays later credited that simple act of praise with turning his hitting career around.

The royal official believed the simple words Jesus told him. And that faith changed his life, and the life of his son.

Now, the central point of this story revolves around the father’s decision of whether or not to believe Jesus. The father shows his determination when he is undaunted by Jesus’ remark that one will not believe unless he sees signs and wonders. In the face of what could be construed as criticism, the official holds fast and repeats his request, “Sir, come to Capernaum before my little boys dies.” Then Jesus says, “Go; your son will live.”

At this moment, the father must make a choice of whether or not to believe Jesus. And let us acknowledge that choosing to believe Jesus was very risky. He knew Jesus had healed other people, maybe even witnessed a healing. He had undoubtedly heard about Jesus turning water into wine. But likely with all of these Jesus was physically present. He was right there,

placing his hand on the sick, his words of healing being given personally, with a touch and power we today cannot even imagine.

Who had ever seen or heard of a long distance healing? Healing was a part of the Master's touch, his personality, his charisma. There was no logical reason Jesus could heal someone by a word spoken twenty miles away.

Plus, this official was an important man. He is connected to the king's court. In fact, in some instances, the Greek word defining him is employed to designate the king's relatives.

This is a man of power and wealth. Notice that when he returns home, his servants come out to meet him. This guy is somebody. So, he must decide whether to take the word of an itinerant preacher, a carpenter's son. This official has journeyed twenty miles on foot to get this healer. Why would he not demand, force, Jesus to return with him? Yet, verse fifty tells us that the royal official "believed the word that Jesus spoke to him..."

Every one of us chooses whether or not to believe Jesus. Like the official, the only confirmation we have that what Jesus says is true is his work. This is difficult because like so much of the Christian faith, this belief is counter intuitive to what society and culture teach us.

We hear what Jesus is telling us. But we wonder:

How can forgiveness be more fulfilling than revenge?

How can faith be more convincing than evidence?

How can generosity bring more security than conserving?

How can humility be more transforming than aggressiveness?

How can servanthood do more good than power?

Do you and I take Jesus at his word?

An eighty-five-year-old couple, having been married almost sixty years, died in a car crash. They had been in good health the last ten years, mainly due to the wife's interest in health food and exercise. When they reached the pearly gates, St. Peter took them to their mansion, which was decked out with a beautiful kitchen and master bath suite and jacuzzi. As they "oohed" and "aahed," the old man asked Peter how much all this was going to cost. "It's free," Peter replied. "This is heaven."

Next they went out back to survey the championship golf course that the home backed up to. They would have golfing privileges every day; and each week the course changed to a new one representing the greatest golf courses on earth. The old man asked, "What are the green fees?" Peter's reply: "This is heaven! You play for free."

Next they went to the clubhouse and saw the lavish buffet lunch with the cuisines of the world laid out. “How much to eat?” asked the old man.

“Don’t you understand yet? This is heaven, it’s free!” Peter replied with some exasperation.

“Well, where are the low-fat and low-cholesterol tables?” the old man asked timidly.

Peter explained, “That’s the best part. You can eat as much as you like of whatever you like and you never get fat and you never get sick. This is heaven!”

With that the old man went into a fit of rage, throwing down his hat and stomping on it, and shrieking wildly. Peter and his wife both tried to calm him down, asking him what was wrong. The old man looked at his wife and said, “This is all your fault! If it weren’t for your blasted bran muffins, I could have been here ten years ago!”

Do we believe what Jesus tells us about how we should live? Or, do we think he is only keeping us from all the fun?

“The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way.” It must have been extraordinarily difficult for this royal official to turn on his heel and head back to Capernaum. Parents will do anything to aid a sick child. But, this father, knowing his young son is on the brink of death, chooses to believe Jesus and illustrates that belief by heading for home. And that step of faith is rewarded when his servants rush out to meet him with the good news that his son has been healed.

Today, we gather to celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. It symbolizes that step of faith, believing that Jesus’ word is true, not only for everyone else, but for me.

Advent is the four weeks prior to Christmas. The purple color denotes the sense of reflection and penance the season incorporates. As we approach the celebration of the coming of the Christ child into the world, we ask ourselves how we have invited the Christ child into our lives.

This morning, acknowledging that like the royal official, you and I have heard Jesus’ word to us, allow the partaking of this bread and grape juice symbolize that first step of faith that declares, “I believe what Jesus tells me.”

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December 6, 2009