

Lenten Eucharist 7am service
March 15, 2010

To me, Jesus says these words almost dismissively—as if he was frustrated with the ineffectual results of his teaching—and then he goes ahead and performs the miracle request anyway! What are we to make of this? I am reminded of a tired, stressed out parent who gives in to his or her child's endless whining for a toy, resulting in a mixed message. Was Jesus just tired? Did he simply change his mind? Did Jesus respond to the royal official's second request to heal his ailing son for a particular reason? Given the authority we give to scripture, we can assume that John intentionally portrayed a mixed message from Jesus' actions. Jesus had a purpose in mind. We are told that every word in scripture is included for a reason. So why did Jesus heal the royal official's son? As we know from other gospel stories, Jesus certainly did not respond to each and every healing request he received throughout his life...

The Gospel stories, and for that matter - much of the Bible - are filled with stories of signs and wonders, miraculous healings, and mysterious events... Sometimes, I will confess, they give me pause. Can I really believe this? – I ask myself. Why do they only seem to occur during biblical times? Why can't I personally witness a dramatic and miraculous healing like that of the royal official's son? I live 2000 years after the life of Jesus – one would think that somebody would have perfected the ability to perform a miracle.

Now I know there are those of us who feel we *have* witnessed such a thing – whether it was an unexpected healing, a change of circumstances, or a truly surprising bit of serendipity. I am familiar with these kinds of situations - Why, last evening I was hoping for just such a bit of fortune when I was trying to put down my thoughts for this morning. As I was struggling with what to say about this gospel story, I mentioned this to my seventeen year old religiously questioning son – He responded with a zinger. “Isn't that where belief comes in? I thought you believed”... “Well, I do”, I said. But it still is hard to make sense of it all.

In this portion of the fourth Gospel, we are reminded by John that this event is Jesus' second “sign” - the miraculous healing of the royal official's son. John makes certain that we see this event in relation to Jesus' first sign in Cana - where he had changed the water into wine at a wedding celebration. (John 2) As the New Interpreters Bible pointed out, there are distinctive parallels... Both of these miracles or signs occurred in Cana. Somebody makes a request and indirectly Jesus seems to refuse the request. But the questioner persists and asks again. Jesus then grants the request. Significantly, in doing so, this results in a new group of people who believe in Jesus: the people with the royal official's son and, even more importantly, beyond them in time and space. These words have continued to impact upon readers for two thousand years – instilling or reinforcing a faith in Jesus for millions of Christians.

Why is this story pattern repeated and what makes it worth repeating? John is clearly trying to make a point. According to one commentary, there is an important theological message in this scene – “the second miracle at Cana has a two fold significance: first, it stresses faith... second, it stresses Jesus' power to give life”. In fact, chapters 2-5 all “establish the central themes and tensions of

the entire Gospel: the possibilities of new life and faith made available through the words and works of Jesus, and the decisions individuals are called to in the face of those possibilities." (p.535)

Jesus seems to have answered the royal official's request because of his strong faith. This man had heard of Jesus and he wanted to be part of things. John reports, "When he heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went and begged him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death". (4:47) The royal official is not deterred by Jesus' initial reprimanding words that only those who see signs and wonders will believe. He respectfully makes his request again – "Sir, come down before my little boy dies" ... The royal official was intentional in his action – and he persisted in his hope that Jesus would save his son. His faith was strengthened from his experience. But we can't all experience Jesus in this way. What are we to do? Somehow, John wants us to see both the wondrous power of Jesus' actions and, more importantly, his life giving potential. This story reflects Jesus' life-giving power – for all to receive.

Faith and hope are the critical elements. If we have faith, then all will be good. But is this always true? Our prayer requests are not always answered – at least in the way we seek. And why does Jesus answer only certain people? What is it about them that invites Jesus' response? Faith in Jesus is available to all. We hear that frequently in scripture. So how do we make sense of Jesus' particularity in this story?

I have recently found myself in circumstances that call on my persistence in hope and faith. I have been working as a chaplain intern at Sibley Hospital these past few months, participating in a Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) program. I visit patients in the hospital as a chaplain. I have enjoyed this work and have also been quite challenged by it. I am responsible for visiting different areas in the hospital, including the ICU, critical care, and orthopedics units. Offering a listening ear and hopefully a calm presence, I try to bring support during a potentially difficult, fearful, or painful time for others who are struggling with physical illness, if not also spiritual questions. One of the theological concepts that repeatedly arises in this work is that of hope. What kind of hope may I strive to communicate to a patient? Is hope possible when a positive medical outcome is not assured? What would the royal official in John's story believe if his son had not recovered?

Faith in Jesus is more than hoping for signs and wonders. The signs and wonders in this gospel story lead us to a faith that believes in the power of Jesus to bring new life to us. A new life in Christ...

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