

46 Jesus returned to Cana in Galilee where he had turned the water into wine. In Capernaum there was a certain royal official whose son was sick. 47 When he heard that Jesus was coming from Judea to Galilee, he went out to meet him and asked Jesus if he would come and heal his son, for his son was about to die. 48 Jesus said to him, “Unless you see miraculous signs and wonders, you won’t believe.”

49 The royal official said to him, “Lord, come before my son dies.”

50 Jesus replied, “Go home. Your son lives.” The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and set out for his home.

51 While he was on his way, his servants were already coming to meet him. They said, “Your son lives!” 52 So he asked them at what time his son had started to get better. And they said, “The fever left him yesterday at about one o’clock in the afternoon.” 53 Then the father realized that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, “Your son lives.” And he and his entire household believed in Jesus. 54 This was the second miraculous sign Jesus did while going from Judea to Galilee. (*Common English Bible*)

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So many of the stories we’re given by the Gospel of John provide different insights into the person of Jesus. I could have offered you two stories today, but given that we have a lot of important business to do in this hour, I decided to stick with just one. Yet I think even this little story offers us insights into Jesus, if we pay careful attention to it.

It can be hard to gain new insight into Jesus. One of you told me that the monologue last week helped you to do so, I’m so pleased to hear that because I know it can be hard. One of the challenges to gaining new insight into Jesus is that most of us think we know everything there is to know about him. We have certain ideas in our head about who Jesus is and then we listen for details that confirm those ideas and perhaps gloss over those that challenge them. A big project of 19th century theologians was writing Life of Jesus books, trying to get to the historical truth about Jesus of Nazareth. At the turn of the 20th century, Albert Schweitzer wrote a book reflecting on these efforts called “The Quest for the Historical Jesus.” In that book he contended that scholar after scholar had looked down the long well of history and seen only their own reflection. The historical Jesus presented in the 19th century looked a whole lot like a 19th century gentleman. This isn’t a particular affliction of 19th century theologians; it is endemic to the human condition. I once saw placards of

a grimacing Jesus in flowing robes playing ice hockey; think a hockey player or fan created that? I hear liberals and conservatives confidently claiming Jesus as the grounds for their opposing convictions on the regular. It is hard to let Jesus be revealed to us, particularly if the revelation troubles our settled ideas or images.

In today's story a powerful man is profoundly vulnerable. A royal official hears Jesus is passing by and makes his way to him because his son is so sick that he is on the brink of death. It doesn't matter how much earthly power one has, when one's child is deathly ill, one is rendered utterly powerless. I haven't had this experience, thanks be to God, but I have listened to others who have. There's a particular terror in the voice of a parent whose child may be nearing death. Our heart breaks for those facing such circumstances— really, any threats to the lives of loved ones, but particularly children. Many have woken up to current immigration enforcement practices because of chilling pictures of children taken from their parents or denied medical treatment.

Now, I think, most of us would assume that Jesus' heart would break too and that he would be moved by compassion to help this man's son. We hear elsewhere that he is stirred to compassion by the needs of the many sick and struggling people pressing in on him. But did you see much evidence of compassion in the story we read today? What is Jesus' first response? "Unless you see miraculous signs and wonders, you won't believe." Seems a bit harsh, no? This guy is desperate and Jesus seems to reply in a rather judgmental way. The man isn't asking for a sign for the sake of a sign. He's asking out of deep need. Now, the "you" in this response is plural— "Unless y'all see miraculous signs and wonders, y'all won't believe." That takes some of the edge out of it for me. One scholar suggests that it's almost like Jesus is talking to himself. Reminding himself of his mission— to inspire belief— and of the human pre-requisites to belief. "Unless y'all humanity see signs and wonders, y'all humanity won't believe." But still... it is not a compassionate response, no "I'm sorry," or "bless your heart," or "oh please let me help"... no, it's a musing that seems fairly unrelated to the request posed. And so it seems the man received it as he simply repeated, "Lord, come before my son dies."

The man and Jesus both have urgent missions— the man urgently needs his son to be healed. Jesus urgently needs to change hearts and minds, to stir belief. Jesus realizes that attending to the man's request will help further his mission so he does. But Jesus doesn't take orders— he sends the man home and declares that his son lives. And... the man believes, he trusts what Jesus says, and goes home... and when his servants meet him on the road and confirm that his son lives, and he determines that his son's fever broke right when Jesus spoke, then his belief gets even stronger and deeper and indeed his whole household comes to belief. Both of their missions are fulfilled.

If we want to pay careful attention to the Jesus revealed in the Gospel of John we need to think about his emphasis on belief, his mission of inspiring belief. I have talked about this with you recently, but I think most of us have a rather thin and cerebral understanding of belief. We think that to believe is to give our minds to certain thoughts or ideas— to intellectually assent. Such as, "I believe God exists." I think that intellectual assent is only a small dimension of belief, it may, in fact, be the smallest dimension of belief. I learned a long time ago that belief is primarily a matter of the heart. We believe that that to which we give our hearts. Diana Eck says that the word "believe" comes from the old English "belove"— it is more about trust than right thinking. "I give my heart to the God who loves me."

It is February, the second month of the year, so all over the world people in 12 step programs of recovery are reading and contemplating the second step "Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." And one of the greatest nuggets of wisdom offered in 12 step literature is that we often come to believe through action— "we act our way into new ways of thinking and trusting; rarely does it work the other way around." Many a person has found recovery by acting as if there is a God who loves them and is providing guidance no matter how unlikely or crazy that seems. And often, in the process of acting as if, people see signs and wonders... and they truly come to believe.

I think, actually, that the man in our story today provides us a powerful image of action into belief. This powerful man asked for help. Who knows if he rationally thought help would come, but he acted as if it could. And admitted he was powerless

to achieve the ends he sought. He sought out power greater than himself. And when that power spoke a word promising his desired end, he trusted that word, and when he heard that his son indeed lives, that trust grew even stronger.

Friends, the Jesus we meet today may not be exactly the warm and fuzzy Jesus we came seeking. But his power to heal is undeniable. And as we continue to confront our deep powerlessness over multiple health crises, international instability, economic turbulence, church transition and so much more... so much that has altered our experience of just about every dimension of our lives, can we give our hearts more fully to Jesus, acting as if he has the power to heal, giving our burdens to him perhaps even on our knees, and waiting for the signs and wonders to come. Oh... and one more thing.... John tells us this is Jesus' second sign, and like the first it unfolds in Cana. And like the first it is subtle— the miracle happens at some distance from Jesus himself and only a handful of people know what happened, by talking with one another their faith increases. I hope that we will testify to one another about the ways that God in Christ is healing us, providing for us, caring for us, so that others can come to believe. Sometimes the signs and wonders are super subtle and only through shared witness can we fully perceive them. So let's act as if, let's align our hearts, and let's join in the mission of Jesus of inspiring belief.

Sources in addition to scripture that influenced the writing of this sermon:

Diana Eck. *Encountering God*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.

Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson J. "Episode 326 Two Healing Stories (John 4:46-5:18)" on their Bible Worm Podcast, <https://www.biblewormpodcast.com/e/episode-326two-healing-stories-john-446-518/>