

John 4:46 to 54

We have been following Jesus' travels and encounters with various people and situations as he moves from town to town in John's Gospel. Imagine a very simple map - a rectangle on end. Then divide the rectangle horizontally into three equal parts. The top section is the region called Galilee, the middle section is the region called Samaria, and the bottom section is the region called Judea. In the top region are the three cities that are important to John's story – Nazareth, Cana and Capernaum. In the middle region there is the Samaritan city of Sychar, and in the bottom region is Jerusalem. Scholars refer to this as the "Cana Cycle." *Geography is theology* in John. In the Cana to Cana cycle, Jesus begins by working on behalf of Jewish people at the wedding at Cana, expands his scope to embrace Samaritans, and concludes by including even Gentiles.

Jesus attended the festival in Jerusalem in the bottom region of Judea, and then decided to go to Galilee – the top region. To get there, he had to pass through the middle region of Samaria where at Sychar he met the woman at the well and spent two days with the town's people. Following this, he went to the top of the rectangle to the region of Galilee, back to Cana which is a straight path from Sychar, the place where he changed water into wine. Throughout John, when Jesus goes to Jerusalem, opposition occurs with the religious rulers. In Galilee, he fares well among the people.

Curiosity seekers are all around. We can assume that the rumours are rampant – and everyone wants to see this Jesus do another “miracle.” The event that is about to take place is not a co-incidence – but a *God-incidence*. We can be pretty sure that Jesus knows the hearts of these curiosity seekers.

There, he encounters a royal official whose son is lying near death in Capernaum. This makes the identity of the royal official especially interesting and scholars debate it. Is he a Roman (Gentile) or a Hellenized Jewish person serving the Jewish leader Herod Antipas. Given the emphasis in this cycle of expanding inclusivity, it makes sense to construe him as Gentile. When the man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he approached Jesus and begged him to come down and heal his son. The man did not come from Capernaum to Cana because he knew that Jesus was going to be there. We are not told what he was doing in Cana. But, while there, he heard that this Jesus, who everyone was excited about, was in Cana that day.

Here, in the midst of the “rumours and tales” of Jesus, this royal official comes to him out of sheer desperation. He has not come because he is a believer. He did not come to Cana seeking Jesus. He did not come as a curiosity-seeker either. Yet, in the providence of God, he just happened to be there when Jesus was there. He came when his defences were down. He came in the frantic anxiety of a parent worrying about a dying child. He is seventeen miles from a dying son, probably

looking for anyone who might help. Finding no hope, when he hears about this legend, this miracle worker, this prophet, this fanatic, this ‘possibility,’ this “last shot in the dark,” he approaches Jesus.

Is this not the way that perhaps the majority of people come to God? Maybe if this life we lead were easy – then no one would pay any attention to God. We would be self-absorbed and content to move on in bliss without any concern. Most often, we come to God when we are desperate.

W.C. Fields, a famously irreligious man, when near the end of his life, was visited by the actor Thomas Mitchell, who found him sitting in bed reading the Bible. When his amazed friend asked what he was doing, he replied, “looking for loopholes.”

That’s what often brings us to God. We’re looking for loopholes. Is there a way around my sons’s death? Is there a way to avoid the trial I’m about to face? Is there a possibility to avoid the inevitable? Is it conceivable that I could circumvent this horrible reality?

We’re told that the official begged: “Sir, please come now before my child dies.” For the love of God, listen to me! He is dying! There is no solace in knowing that God loves you, that your children are God’s children, and that God is there when you cannot be. That is the essence of faith. It is hope beyond hope, and it is living as though we are certain

of God's eternal love.

That is what this man eventually grasped, and it is what the curiosity-seekers completely missed. Jesus said to them: "Won't any of you believe in me unless I do more and more miracles?" In Greek the word for 'you' is in the plural. Jesus is addressing the crowd of curiosity-seekers, not the official. Jesus is saying: You come here because of what you have seen and heard. What will it take for you to believe, to have faith, and to know God's love for you?

Soren Kierkegaard, the famous Christian existentialist philosopher said, *"There exists a paradox between reason and faith. Reason can bring us to the edge of faith – but ultimately, religion defies human logic and requires that we take a 'leap of faith' as we commit ourselves to Christ."*

Signs and wonders appeal to our reason. But belief is not a product of reason – it is a product of faith. From the pinnacle of reason, the next step has to be the *"leap of faith"*. We move from reason to faith, and from faith to belief.

The Royal Official is still expecting Jesus to return with him to Capernaum. He knows what he wants and he hopes beyond hope that Jesus can give it to him. But, he is still bound by what seems possible. In his mind it is more like he has found a doctor rather than "calling on the healing power of God." But Jesus says to him simply: "Go back

home. Your son is healed!”

Now the most interesting twist in the whole passage is that the man takes a *leap of faith*. This is where the crowd witnesses the most important miracle. This is where the rubber meets the road and the reason becomes faith and the faith becomes belief and God becomes real!

“And the man believed Jesus and started home.” Imagine the crowd standing there in an amazed stupor. They had probably planned to follow Jesus to Capernaum to see what would happen. They had come for evidence - to see, to touch, and witness. But all they got was a pledge: “Go back home. Your son is healed!” What a disappointment. What a letdown! John is going a step further, though, and indicating that the experience of the healing caused direct belief in both the father and the others who witnessed it for themselves (just as the Samaritans believe not only because the Samaritan woman shared her testimony, but because of their own experience of Jesus’ power.

But it’s what they didn’t see that was so miraculous: As they stood in their stupor, something did change – in the heart of the Royal Official. He didn’t have to beg Jesus to come anymore. He didn’t have to worry anymore. He was able to let go of his anxiety. He didn’t even have to go home to check on his son. “While he was on his way, some of his servants met him with the news that all was well — his son had

recovered. He asked them when the lad had begun to feel better, and they replied, “Yesterday afternoon at about one o’clock his fever suddenly disappeared!”

The father realized that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, “Your son will live.’ So why did the father not hurry to make the seventeen mile trek back home, but instead his slaves met him the next day! He is in no hurry to get back. He has taken the *‘leap of faith’*. This man has been transformed from a desperate, frightened, begging parent into a cool, contemplative, confident father. He is the same man, but everything about him has changed. It is that thing that must change in everyone who comes to sincere faith in Christ – everyone who comes to believe without seeing, everyone who has taken “reason” as far as it could go and then jumped from the pinnacle where it leads, into the hands of God.

Even though his son was cured, the official was healed. He had a new relationship with God. He understood the love of God. Having reasoned, he finally took the leap of faith, bringing his household with him. At that moment, when everyone else was deciding whether or not to change their minds, this man changed his heart. He surrendered it to Jesus. *“And the officer and his entire household believed that Jesus was the Messiah.”* It was customary at this time that the religion of the head of the house determined the religion of the whole household as in Cornelius and Lydia in Acts.

There's a story about a pastor who was at a church conference in South Africa. The speaker, was Tony Campolo, a famous preacher and evangelist, and one of the founders of the movement often referred to as the Toronto Blessing. This is a movement that believes in a theology of signs and wonders. Those engaged in this ministry contend that miracles are part of the witness that we should take to an unbelieving world as we try to win people to Christ.

This particular evangelist was very respectful of the pastor, even though miracles were not any part of this pastor's ministry. When the evangelist asked if the pastor was into healing people, he explained to the evangelist that when he's with people who are sick, he always prayed for them to be healed, but being perfectly honest, he hadn't ever seen anything spectacular happen. The evangelist jokingly reminded the pastor that not seeing anything spectacular happen hadn't deterred him from being a preacher. They both laughed, even as the evangelist affirmed that the ministry of Christ was to preach, to teach, and to heal, and that all three of those things should be part of what we do in our everyday service for the Kingdom.

The next week the pastor was back in the States and preaching at a church in Oregon. On impulse, as he ended the service he said to the congregation that if anyone wanted to remain behind for healing, he would be glad to pray with them. He told them they shouldn't expect

much to happen, because nothing much happens when he prayed, but if they wanted to give it a try, he'd be willing to pray as hard as he could. Surprisingly, about thirty people stayed behind and waited patiently as he prayed for one after the other.

He did not want to do this healing thing fast, like some of the healers he had seen on television. He wanted to really talk to a person before he prayed to get a feel for what was on that person's heart. He wanted to hug each person and connect with him or her as deeply as he knew how. He did that with each of the people who stayed behind, and in each case he put some olive oil that he had brought along with him on each of their heads. It took him more than an hour to pray through that little group. But he did it! What intrigued him was that most of the people who had come for healing had nothing physically wrong with them. One man needed healing for an addiction to pornography. One woman wanted healing for her marriage. Someone else asked healing for anger. But there were a few who did have physical illnesses.

Four days later he got a telephone call, and the woman at the other end said, "On Sunday you prayed for my husband. He had cancer." When he heard the word "had" his heart quickened a bit. "Had cancer?" he asked. The woman answered, "Well, he's dead now." When she said that the pastor thought to himself, "a lot of good that did." Then the woman said, "You don't understand. When my husband and I walked into that church on Sunday, he was angry with God. He had cancer and he knew he was

going to be dead soon, and he hated God for letting it happen. He wanted to see his grandchildren grow up more than anything. At night he would lie in bed and curse God. It was horrible. And the angrier he got toward God, the meaner he was to everyone around him. It was unbearable to be in the same room with him. His nastiness just kept getting worse and worse and worse. But then you laid hands on him on Sunday morning and you prayed for him. When he walked out of church I knew there was something different. I could feel it. He was a different person. The last four days of our lives have been the best four days we've ever had together. We talked and laughed. We even sang hymns together. It was a good, good time." She paused, then added something really profound. She said, "Pastor, he wasn't cured, but he was healed." The pastor hung up the phone, knowing he had learned something about the work of the Holy Spirit. As the pastor walked away from the phone, he could still hear her last words echoing in his ears and making their way down to his heart... *"He wasn't cured. He was healed."*

Jesus, particularly in John's Gospel, seems to have an ambivalent relationship to what we would call miracles but what John describes as "signs." That's an important distinction, between signs and miracles. In John's Gospel, a "sign" is something that is not simply miraculous but that reveals Jesus' divine nature and mission to those who are open to seeing it. They are, in this sense, pointers to Jesus' identity. And as John indicates from the first verses of his gospel, Jesus himself functions as something of a sign. He is the Revealer, the Word who was with God

from the beginning and is God, the Word made flesh who makes the invisible God known.

Throughout his Gospel, John shares seven signs that Jesus performs, each revealing something significant about Jesus' identity and mission. Early in the story, Jesus turns water into wine – and not just wine, but the best wine in vast quantities – revealing the profound abundance of God in Jesus, what is earlier described as “grace upon grace.” As Jesus heals the son of a “royal official,” he reveals his opposition to those things that keep abundant life from the children of God and his ability to restore health and life.

Jesus' chief mission is to reveal the heart of God, the God who “so loved the world” that God sent him in the first place. Will people get caught up in the “sign” and miss the “signifier” – that is, the thing to which the sign points? Or perhaps Jesus is frustrated that people look to his “miracles” instead of to him for signs of God's favour. Or maybe he knows that the true sign will come only in his death and resurrection.

This focus in signs and miracles might at first seem somewhat distant from our everyday life, as there seems to be a scarcity of miracles that might confuse us about God's intentions. Yet keep in mind that the issue isn't the miraculous, but signs – signs that point to God's presence in our lives. We still tend to look for signs: signs of whether or not to take a job, to enter into a relationship, to decide upon one college over another, to

continue treatment or give in to the inevitability of a diagnosis, to keep faith with another or betray that relationship. At one point or another, we all look for signs, something that will help us to find the way, or at least the next step, forward.

Perhaps that's what's at the heart of Jesus' ambivalence with signs. In the end, his signs are most beneficial when they point us to God's love – God's love revealed in the broken but triumphant figure of Jesus on the cross. A crucified Messiah was not the sign either his disciples or contemporaries were looking for, but it was the one they needed, as it demonstrated that God seeks us out not in our triumphs but our defeats, comes to us not in our places of achievement but regret, and abides with us not simply or even most noticeably in times of light but also in those moments of deepest darkness.

This, in turn, may help us discover God's presence in our lives, as we recognize that God sent the chief sign of God's love, for God's wayward world in the figure of a broken but triumphant man on the cross. So when we encounter events and persons in our life and wonder what they mean or hope to find from their guidance, we might ask the following:

Do they point us to God's love, to the people that God loves, to the broken places in life that call out for love, and to the broken places in life in which God's love for us, and ours for each other is most clearly expressed?

In the scene today and throughout John's Gospel, it would seem that at those moments when we are drawn to love others as Jesus loved us, then – and perhaps only then – are we really “reading the signs” aright.

Amen.