

“A Father’s Plea”*All in the Family, part #3*

Call to Worship (from Psalm 95)

Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord!

Let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.

Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.

For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods.

Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.

For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

John 4:43-54

This is a good place to be. Take a look around you. Go ahead, make eye contact with someone next to you. I don’t know how you felt when you woke up this morning – excited, tired, grumpy? Maybe it took you a few cups of coffee to get going. But I want you to know, you are in the right place this morning. You are not here by accident. These people around you love you, appreciate you, and are here to worship God with you. Your presence matters to them, it matters to me, and it especially matters to God.

Would you please pray with me? Lord, if you have something to tell us this morning, we are ready to listen. Look through us, test our hearts, show us anything we need to change, so that we can more closely follow Jesus, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

I like to walk. For most of my life, I have walked, hiked, jogged, and even run long distances. In high school, I ran track and cross country, completing distance races 2, 3 and even 5 miles long. The longest hike I’ve ever taken was 12

miles up Mt. Katahdin in Maine. Of course, that's nothing compared to my younger brother, who has run ultra-marathons, even 100 miles in one race.

I used to run the 2-mile event in high school, eight laps around the track. It was pretty easy to lose track of the laps, so a coach on the infield told me my time and how many laps I had left. Mindless running makes no sense. When you run, you have to have a purpose. You could be competing, trying to be healthier, or just enjoying some nice scenery and weather outside.

But have you ever walked, or run, a long distance because of some great need? My family once ran through Chicago O'Hare airport to catch a flight. We were desperate to get there before it was too late. And we felt great relief when we got to the gate on time.

There are times when we go great distances for ourselves. And there are times we go distances for others. My dad and I were canoeing once, and we left one of our vehicles at the mouth of the river so that we could return to the trailer at the end of our trip. But unfortunately, I left keys in the first car upstream, and had to run all the way back. But I knew why I was running – the keys represented our desire to return home and safe, before it started raining on us!

I find that parents will go to great lengths to do things for their children. For example, this spring, Katja and I took our children to Chicago to get their passports. It was a long trip, but the purpose made it worth it.

So let me ask those of you who are parents, what lengths do you go to get what your children need? You probably drive them to school, to games, to the doctor and dentist. You drive them to places for their education, their health, and for the sake of their relationships with others. You drive them to grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, to connect them with their extended families. You go

places because there is something valuable to obtain at the destination. That's why we go.

The story in our scripture today is about a father who sought out Jesus because his son was dying. He believed that Jesus, a miracle worker, could help him. But this text betrays us a little bit, because these 12 verses, about 250 words, only took us about three minutes to read. The details of this story are lost to us, who have little knowledge of Judean geography. It sounds like Jesus waltzed into town, the father heard he was next door, so he strolled over, found Jesus, and then quickly went home to find his boy alive and well again.

But the passage gives us a few clues that this is more than a story about a "guy next door." For instance, the man said to Jesus, "Sir, come down with me." After the man returned home, the scripture starts with, "Yesterday, at one in the afternoon..."

So here's a little geography lesson for you. Capernaum to Cana is approximately 18 miles. Certainly, if you were in good shape, you could walk that far in one day. My brother probably could run that distance in three or four hours. But here is the other thing. Capernaum is on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, one of the lowest points on the planet, almost 700 feet below sea level. But Cana is in the Galilean hills, close to 900 feet above sea level. That means the father walked (or ran) 18 miles and climbed 1600 feet! By comparison, Shanty Creek, about 3 miles away is 400 feet higher than where we are sitting right now, and I'm guessing most of you would not be thrilled to walk that short distance after worship today!

So now we see this is no simple stroll downtown. Consider the timeline of this story. First of all, Jesus arrived in Cana after traveling through Samaria. Once

he got there, the people heard that he was in town, and word spread. I would guess, since Jesus was so popular, it might have taken a full day for the news to reach the neighboring towns. At this point, it is only a guess how sick the man's son was. Maybe the illness had come suddenly. Maybe the boy had been sick for a few days. The boy's father had to make a serious decision – to stay by his son's side, or to travel, for at least one whole day, through hot, hilly country, to find Jesus some 18 miles away, if Jesus was still in Cana. For a whole day, this father must have imagined terrible things – one, that Jesus was already gone, unable to be located, and two, if the father was able to find Jesus, it would take time to convince Jesus to come with him, and at least another day just to travel back to Cana. That's a lot of time for things to go badly.

And on top of all this, there are Jesus's cryptic words. "Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will never believe." Believe what, exactly? That Jesus is the Son of God. John makes it pretty clear why he wrote his gospel. He says in 20:31 – "But these [words] are written [so] that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." In John's gospels, Jesus' miracles were always given as proof of who Jesus was, and proof of his power. But Jesus' words here are ironic and challenging, almost sarcastic. It is as if he is daring someone to say, "I will believe in you, even if I don't see these miracles." The Galileans had welcomed him, but it was because of a superficial interest in Jesus' miracles, not because (according to John) that they actually believed in him. And then in the midst of Jesus' lecture, this father has the audacity to say, "Come and heal my son!"

So Jesus tells him five simple words. "Go, your son will live."

What would you have done? Demand that Jesus come with you? Express disbelief? “Is that all, Jesus? No magic words? No special prayer, not even a piece of cloth with your blessing wrapped in it? Just go?”

I would have been skeptical, to say the least. But look what the man did. “He took Jesus at his word and departed.” (John 4:50) That is a pretty straightforward example of faith – trusting what Jesus says. This man walked 18 miles, uphill, for a three minute conversation with Jesus, and now, at a simple command, he hurried back home, not knowing what the result is going to be.

Well, John doesn’t keep us in suspense. We get the answer. A servant met the father on the road the next day and told him, “Your boy was healed yesterday, at one o’clock.” And the father puts two and two together. Jesus has performed a miracle. His boy is well.

The end of verse 53 hits me hard. John writes, “So [the father] and his whole household believed.” They didn’t just believe that Jesus had performed a miracle. They believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior.

We all want physical health for our children. That’s obvious. But what about their spiritual health? This story does not just end with the fact that the child was healed. No, because of the father’s actions, the whole household believed in Jesus. This is momentous! This means, as parents, our actions are the link our children need to come to faith.

So the question we need to ask ourselves is, how desperate are we? It is one thing to say we want our children to trust in Jesus. I say a great many things, and they probably all sound great. But what do our actions reveal about our beliefs? How far would you walk to save your children? Eighteen miles, uphill, both ways, in the snow and rain? Even if you don’t have children, this is a

question better answered sooner than later. The actions, morals, principles, and practices you put into action in your life now will have a profound impact on the faith of your children, your neighbor's children, even the very children that are present with us in worship today.

It is my greatest desire to see people come to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, especially young people. It is one of the reasons I felt God call me into youth ministry, and eventually ordained ministry. I believe we all need Jesus. It's as simple as that.

But as a church, we have our work cut out for us. We ask for prayers all the time in our congregation. We ask for miracles. Why? Most of the time, because someone we love is sick. That's OK. Certainly, that is what this father did for his son. But are we just asking God to help us avoid pain and discomfort? Or are we asking for miracles and signs and wonders because they will prove to those around us, and ourselves, that Jesus is the Christ? There is a world of difference in that kind of prayer. We pray for sick people to get well all the time. But how often do we pray for Jesus to come to our families? How often do we pray for the spiritually sick to receive Jesus?

We may say our purpose is "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world," but until our actions support that purpose, our words will be empty. We will be of no use to anyone in God's kingdom if we hear the good news of Jesus Christ, and yet we stay at home, refusing to take risks and do the difficult work of bringing someone to the Lord.

How desperate are you? Are you desperate for Jesus? Do you want to know his love, grace, and forgiveness? Do you want to know his power in your life? And more importantly, do you want your family to know that? If so, you

need to be like this dad. Go to Jesus and beg, plead for the lives of your children. Trust in God to answer your prayer, even if it doesn't seem like God has answered it the way you expect. Take an active role in bringing your children, not just to church, but to Jesus.

You know the old hymn, "This is my story. This is my song." It can't just be the words we sing quietly on Sunday. It has to be the story of our lives.

So let's do it. Let's go the distance. Let's bring Jesus to our children. That's where I'm going. I hope you come with me.

(transition to communion – confession and pardon.)

Memory verse

John 5:20 - "The Father loves the Son and shows him everything that he does. He will show him greater works than these so that you will marvel."

Reflection questions

1. Do you want your children and grandchildren to be reached by Jesus?
What lengths are you willing to go to bring Christ to them?
2. What is the faith legacy of your father? Has it helped or hindered you in believing in God?
3. Is there someone in your life you wish Jesus would come and visit? How can you pray for them?
4. What prayers do you ask for physical healing? What prayers do you ask for salvation? Whom are they for?