

## Sermon for Trinity 21 – John 4:46-54

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

John chapter 4 tells us that a certain government official requested of Jesus that He would come down and heal his son, because his son was at the point of death. This man was from Capernaum, and he was a nobleman, a man of high status. Perhaps it was for this reason that he had an expectation of good things from the Lord because of who he was. He was an important official, after all. He wasn't just some peasant. He had learned to expect people to do things for him. This may explain the rebuke he earned from the Lord: "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe."

Expectations can cloud the minds of us Christians. We expect good things to happen because of our station, because of our status, because of who we are. Well, who do you think you are, before Him? God's not your errand boy. He's not just someone whom you go to and expect only good things simply because He's good. Haven't we thought that we have a right to expect good things because, after all, we've done all things that are expected of us? Why wouldn't He help us?!

Perhaps this government official wasn't quite thinking this way. But he was undoubtedly in distress. He was being visited with something with which no parent should ever have to be visited: the affliction of a child to the point of death. Nobody could do anything for his son. But Jesus was there, and so the man went down to see Him. The official actually came himself; he didn't send an ambassador. He came himself and asked the Lord to come down and heal his son. This shows that there was some kind of faith which existed in the man. He at least thought that Jesus could help when nobody else could. It shows his heart was in the right place with respect to his son, and, in a certain respect, to Jesus. So what does Jesus say to him? "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." It's as if He said, "Don't weary Me!"

This story may remind us of another similar situation in Jesus' life when He was asked by a centurion to heal the man's servant who was near death. Unlike the story told today, and in great contrast to the important government official, the centurion said to Jesus, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed." It was the high-ranking nobleman who required Jesus to come down to his house. But consider how the centurion's faith is much greater than the official's. To be sure, the centurion is a man of much lower estate than the government official. On the one hand, the centurion expects great things from a distance although he knows himself to be unworthy. On the other hand, the official expects the Lord to come close because he considers himself to be worthy. For the centurion, Jesus comes down; for the official, He will not.

Notice, Jesus does not do what the government official asks. The Lord did not do what the man prayed He would do. The man reaches the point of exasperation because Jesus has just rebuked him: "Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe." At his wits end the man cries out, "Sir, come down before my child dies!" It's as if he says, "Jesus, you are right. I don't have what it takes. I don't have the faith that I need. I should not have expected great things because of my status, because I am just like everyone else: a poor miserable sinner. And yet, my son is dying. My heart aches for him. I don't know what else to say! I don't know what else to do! I'm lost! I'm sunk! I'm trapped in a corner! Please! Come down before my child dies!"

And Jesus will not.

Doesn't it appear that Jesus is unloving and uncaring? Haven't you ever felt that way when it seems He hasn't answered your prayers? Even when you earnestly pleaded that He would? Even still He says, "No." "Go your way," He says.

But then He adds this marvelous ray of sunshine – this comfort of glorious mercy: "Your son lives!"

That changes everything. Suddenly Jesus' refusal to come down to the official's dying son is made into something greater than the official could have ever expected: Now he goes home having as much faith in Jesus' word of promise as the centurion had, which before this he didn't have. No longer was the official enslaved to plead on the faulty foundation of his merit and high status. He is freed by something far superior, something far more certain: faith in the promise of Jesus.

The Lord provides: not only the healing the official sought, but the faith he needed. We are told, "The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way." What was the man thinking as he went on his way? He has no evidence that Jesus helped him, because Jesus simply said, "Go." He had only the promise to which to cling, "Your son lives." But to that promise, he holds fast.

Dearly beloved, hold fast to God's promise. For that promise will carry you as you go on your way, even before you see the evidence that God will help you.

What happens next? The official gets home to find just what he expected to find: He servants told him that his son began to recover. The fever left him at the seventh hour, the very same hour Jesus said, "Your son lives." And then we are told, "And the official himself believed, and all his household." He believes before; he believes again. He believes upon believing.

But so do we.

We hear the promise, the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, His mercy, His glorious, redeeming sacrifice for us poor sinners. We believe that same forgiveness of sins covers *our* sins, *our* selfishness, *our* foolish expectations, *our* wanton and inadequate faith. The forgiveness of sins that we needed we receive and we believe ... and we believe again ... and we believe again ... and again every time we come back to the Divine Service to receive Christ in Word and in Blessed Sacrament.

The official's whole household believed, including the son whom the fever had left. The fever is gone, and now there is great rejoicing, celebration, and a festive spirit, as there is also here in this place. For you receive also at the holy altar perfect healing, and the fever of all earth's troubles leaves you as well. Rejoice, celebrate, eat, drink, and be merry, as the fever leaves us all. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠

*This sermon (with only slight modifications) was preached by the Rev. Dr. B.F. Eckhardt at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Kewanee, IL, the parish which he serves.*