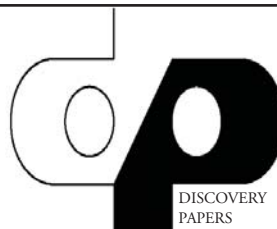




SOMETHING BETTER



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John 4:43-54
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A friend of mine, Gil Ahrens, wrote a book that tells of how his wife Kim was paralyzed in an automobile accident involving a drunken driver. Although he writes for all of us, in the conceit of the book, he writes to his daughter in order to help her come to grips with what happened. He writes of how he and Kim prayed constantly for God to “restore strength and feeling in your mother’s legs so that she could walk.” He also notes, “We prayed for the discovery of cures for spinal cord injuries to bring your mother and others like her back into the world of the freely mobile. We prayed for God to perform miracles.”¹

In John 4:43-54, we meet a man like Gil—a man not with a disabled wife but with a gravely ill child. We meet a father who wants Jesus to heal his son. Jesus responds to him in a most curious manner. We meet Jesus—or, we can meet Jesus—in similar ways, when we’re overcome by helplessness. When we appeal to Jesus, how will he respond to us?

What kind of welcome?

John 4:43-45:

⁴³After the two days he departed for Galilee.
⁴⁴(For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown.) ⁴⁵So when he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast. For they too had gone to the feast.

In the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), the “hometown” where Jesus, a prophet, has no honor is Nazareth. Nazareth, though, is nowhere mentioned in this narrative, apart from the unstated understanding that Nazareth is in the region of Galilee. To what hometown, therefore, is Jesus referring in the gospel of John? Literally, the word “hometown” would be translated “fatherland.” Jesus departed for the Galilee, but where did he depart from? He departed from the region Samaria, where many people believed in him first because of the words of a woman and then because of the words of Jesus himself (John 4:39-42). Samaria is not Jewish territory. Galilee, on the other hand, is Jewish territory, as is the region of Judea, where Jerusalem is located. For Jesus, a Jewish prophet, his “fatherland” is Judea and Galilee.

Wait a minute. When Jesus comes to Galilee, the Galileans welcome him, and when he visited Jerusalem, many believed in him. So how can it be said that Jesus has no honor in his fatherland (Judea and Galilee)? Jews in both Judea and Galilee responded to him, yes, but in each case their response was based on signs and miraculous works (John 2:23). Although Jesus was apparently able to know things about the Samaritan woman by supernatural means, the Samaritans’ faith was based on words, not signs.

In John 4:43-54, Jesus advocates faith that is not based solely on signs. Faith based solely on signs will prove to be shaky both in Judea and Galilee. When Jesus came to Jerusalem and many believed in him based on signs, he pulled back from them (John 2:23-25). In Galilee, many who walked with Jesus based on his signs withdrew from him when his words troubled them (John 6:66). In the prologue, John observed that Jesus “came to his own”—that is, his own people, the Jews—“but his own people did not receive him” (John 1:11). In Jesus’ fatherland (Judea and Galilee), he has no honor because those who believe in him and welcome him do so superficially, solely on the basis of signs.

Although Jesus understands that he has no honor in Galilee, he goes there nevertheless.

The limitation of signs

How are we to understand the signs of Jesus, his miraculous works of power? John reports particular signs of Jesus so that his readers may “believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” (John 20:31). Signs, therefore, can play an important part in faith, especially at first (see the book of Acts). But John, especially in recording not only the signs of Jesus but also the words of Jesus, knows that signs have their limitations. First, works of power that serve as signs are just that, signs, or indicators. Signs *signify* something, but many people treat them solely as works of power. Many people don’t want a work of power for the sake of faith; they just want a work of power.

Scholar N.T Wright invites us to imagine a town planner designing a new set of road signs to get people around the streets: “The town is old, famous and beautiful, and nothing but very fine and well-designed signs will do for such a setting. But when the signs are put up, you

discover that everyone is stopping and getting out of their cars to stand and admire the signs. Instead of the traffic flowing smoothly by, it's getting clogged up worse than before.² What's the result? You get sign-worshippers, not Jesus-followers.

Second, although signs, if interpreted properly, can lead someone to faith, they can, if interpreted improperly, create a need for more signs. If we need signs, and the signs run out, then faith will dry up. Later in the gospel of John, Thomas, one of Jesus' disciples, discounts the testimony of the other disciples and refuses to believe that Jesus has risen from the dead. When the risen Jesus appears to Thomas, Jesus tells him, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). Thomas witnesses the last and greatest sign in the gospel of John, the resurrection, but he will have to carry on without dependence on signs. We too must carry on without dependence on signs.

Third, a need for signs, if unchecked, can make one vulnerable to charlatans, who are only too happy to manufacture a few signs to draw attention to themselves and relieve you of a few of your shekels.

What about words?

The problem with words

John 4:46-49:

⁴⁶So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. ⁴⁷When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. ⁴⁸So Jesus said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." ⁴⁹The official said to him, "Sir, come down before my child dies."

Interesting: Jesus seeks faith not based solely on signs, and when he returns to Galilee, he comes to Cana, where he accomplished his fist sign, turning water into wine (John 2:1-11). What will he find when he returns to Cana?

The first thing—rather, the first person—he finds is an official with a gravely ill son. John does not specify what sort of official the man is. Most likely, he's attached to Herod Antipas, the Galilean tetrarch. The man's attachment, however, is unimportant to John. It's enough for John to note that he's a person of power in Galilee. The official's power, though, is limited, as is that of any official. He can't keep his son from getting sick, and he can't keep his son from dying. He can, however, make the fifteen-mile

trip from Capernaum to Cana to appeal to Jesus, who is known for his works of power. With his son near death, the official asks Jesus to leave Cana, come to Capernaum, and heal his son. Likewise, our power is limited, but we can do what the official did: we can come to Jesus.

What parent among us wouldn't resort to almost any means necessary to keep his or her child from dying? If, say, your son had a rare disease and you heard of a specialist who was known to treat such a disease, wouldn't you take pains to get your son an appointment with such a specialist? This father was not able to bring his son with him, so he asks Jesus to make a house call, so to speak, even if the house is fifteen miles away. Still, with what we know about Jesus, or, perhaps, with what we *think* we know about Jesus, we might expect him to help a desperate father.

So, how about it, Jesus?

"Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." Huh? The pronoun "you" is not singular but plural. Jesus is not speaking only to the official but to many people—apparently, Galileans. Even if Jesus isn't singling out the father, isn't his response rather harsh? A father whose son is on the verge of death comes to a healer who responds not to his request, at least not directly, but instead leverages the father's pain in order to challenge the father and his people. If you came to the pastors and elders and asked us to pray for your ill child and we responded to you the way Jesus responded to the official, you might wonder whether you're at the right church.

The words of Jesus in this passage, and in many other passages in the gospels, for that matter, aren't exactly dripping with tenderness. I once asked someone who was investigating the claims of Jesus to read one of the gospels. Being interested in medicine and understanding that Luke was a physician, he decided to read the gospel of Luke. When he finished, I asked him for his impressions. His conclusion? "Jesus is harsh!"

Our greatest need

How are we to understand the words of Jesus? Far from being insensitive to the official, Jesus is sensitive to his greatest need, and to the greatest need in Galilee: the need for faith. If the official has faith in Jesus, if he believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, he has what he needs, for surely he will face more difficulties. If he needs a sign, a work of power, when encountering the next difficulty, and Jesus, wherever he is, doesn't come through the way he wants, what then will come of his faith?

When Jesus doesn't respond the way we want him to,

we may wonder if he's being harsh or insensitive—or if he exists at all. Always remember, though, that Jesus knows us and our needs far better than we do. Specifically, he knows that our greatest need is our need for faith, our need to trust him. If we have faith, we can walk with Jesus through the valley of the shadow of death, fear no evil, and trust that the outcome, somehow, some way, will be for the best. Therefore, for the sake of our faith, Jesus oftentimes will not respond to us the way we think he should.

Does the official understand that what he really needs is faith, not a healthy son? Probably not. Who among us, if we were in his place, would? His son is near death, and whatever Jesus is talking about, he's wasting precious time, and it's a long way to Capernaum. Who cares about faith when your son is dying? All the father cares about is his son. In an attempt to persuade Jesus to come with him immediately, he therefore repeats his request, compactly, urgently, and tenderly, for this time he refers to his son as "my child": "Sir, come down before my child dies."

So, how about it, Jesus?

Believing the word

John 4:50:

⁵⁰Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way.

Note: Jesus does *not* agree to the official's request. The official asked Jesus to come to Capernaum, but Jesus refused to go. Instead, he remains in Cana and tells the official to go (apparently to Capernaum), and to go without him. Oh, and Jesus also tells him that his son will live—literally, "your son lives." There is no sign to see, for the father is in Cana and his son is in Capernaum, and Jesus is seeking to engender faith that isn't dependent on signs.

So, how about it, official?

The official believes. Believes what? John reports that he believes "the word that Jesus spoke to him." A prophet has no honor in his fatherland, for in the prophet's fatherland—in this case, Galilee—they will not believe unless they see signs. In Samaria, however, people believed in Jesus because of the "word" of a woman and because of the "word" of Jesus. Now in Galilee, a man believes not a sign that he sees but a "word" that he hears. Finally, Jesus finds what he's looking for in Galilee, or he engenders what he's looking for: he finds and engenders faith that isn't dependent on signs.

What "word" does the official believe? What did Jesus say to the official? "Your son lives." The official believes that his son lives, perhaps that he has recovered. John says nothing about whether the father believes that Jesus has healed his son. Perhaps he believes simply that Jesus has supernatural knowledge of his son's recovery. All we know is that the official believes what Jesus said: his son is alive.

Note, first of all, what the official *doesn't* do. He doesn't ask Jesus to come to Capernaum. Twice he had asked Jesus to come to Capernaum, believing that a house call was his only hope. Now he releases that demand. Note, second of all, what the official *does*: he leaves. He believed the word of Jesus, not only the claim that his son lives but also the command to go. So, he goes—he goes without the healer; he goes without a sign.

Stop demanding signs

If Jesus doesn't give us the sign we're looking for, could it be it's because he wants to do something better than what we're looking for? What he wants most is to engender faith. When he finds faith in us, he finds what *he's* looking for. Sure, ask for works of power, ask for signs, but, like the official, stop demanding works of power; stop depending on signs.

Larry Crabb tells of meeting a cheerful woman who was helped by one of his books after her husband abandoned her. Crabb's words, she told him, encouraged her that Christ was sufficient for everything she needed. Crabb told the woman, "You have felt very encouraged by the truth that Christ is enough. But help me understand exactly what you mean. What is Christ enough for?"

"Oh, for everything I need," the woman said with a smile.

"What do you need?" Crabb said. "What are you expecting the Lord to do?"

"Bring my husband back, of course. My three little girls need a daddy. And I need a husband. I just know God will work in his heart to bring him back. I don't know when, but I know it will happen."

When Crabb indicated that he knew of no biblical basis for her confidence, the woman's mood abruptly changed. "How can you even doubt it?" she shot back. "Do you think it's been easy for me to be alone? If God is as faithful as he says he is, then he'll bring my husband back. He must!"³

Ask for much. Ask for the healing of an ill child. Ask for the return of your husband. Ask for much, but demand

nothing. Stop demanding signs and follow Jesus, with or without signs.

In C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, a senior devil warns a junior devil about God, "the Enemy": "Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys."⁴

Closed hands, especially hands clenched in demand, can't receive anything. The official, having released his demand, is now able to receive a gift.

New life in more ways than one

John 4:51-54:

⁵¹As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering. ⁵²So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, "Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him." ⁵³The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." And he himself believed, and all his household. ⁵⁴This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.

The official's servants literally tell him not that his son is recovering but that he "lives." Jesus had told him that his son lives; now his servants verify that his son lives. After discerning from his servants the timing of his son's healing, the official realizes that it coincided with Jesus' word to him. Now John reports that the official believes—evidently, not only in the word of Jesus but also in Jesus himself. Formerly, the official believed—or at least hoped—that Jesus could heal a gravely ill person in the presence of that person. Now, he believes Jesus can heal a gravely ill person from many miles away.

The son lives physically, but the father lives spiritually, for those who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, have "life" in his name (John 20:31). But hold on: the official's entire household, which includes the official's son, also now believes. The son, who was on the verge of death, has been given new life in more ways than one. And which "way" is more important? He's been restored to life physically, but he will nevertheless die one day. In believing in Jesus and receiving life in the name of Jesus, the son will live abundantly—and live abundantly beyond death.

When the official first approached Jesus, he wanted Jesus to heal his son. Jesus, though, first by challenging

the father and then by *not* granting his request to come to Capernaum, gives him so much more: faith and abundant life that transcends death for him, his son, and even his entire household. The official received the gift of faith, and when you have faith, you have something to give to others.

Receive the gift

You pray for a work of power and you look for a sign, something like a healed son; Jesus does not respond the way you want him to; and ... you get something better. You get the gift of faith in Jesus. You get life—life abundant, life overflowing, life that overflows from you to bless others so that they too might believe, so that they too might have life.

You cannot depend on signs. You can depend on Jesus, who sometimes gives you signs and always, in the gospels, gives you words so that you might believe in him. You start out hoping for a work of power, but Jesus challenges you with confusing and disruptive words to show you, in the end, that he is much more powerful than you thought. God, says the apostle Paul, "is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20). Jesus engenders faith, or deepens faith, doing far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, first by *not* doing all that what we ask or think.

It's hard to receive a gift while you're demanding something else. You can't receive a gift with clenched fists. Stop demanding signs—open your hands—in order to receive the gift of faith.

Greater than any miracle

Jesus healed the official's son. Jesus doesn't heal everyone, though. Jesus hasn't healed Kim Ahrens, Gil's wife—at least not yet. In his book, Gil tells his daughter that "God did not perform mighty, headline-making miracles in our lives." God did not give them healing: "What he gave us, however, above all else, was his fellowship. He entered into our lives and stayed beside us. The comfort and assurance of his fellowship were greater than any miracle we might have otherwise hoped for." From Gil's perspective, they asked for a work of power but got something better: the gift of faith. Anything else? Yes, not only did they receive more than they wanted, they also received something to give: "We were once wayward travelers, not knowing that we were lost. But we got transformed into a beacon for other travelers like the ones we once were."⁵

I'm one of those travelers. After I had been introduced to Gil at a party several years ago, he called me and wanted to have lunch. I thought it would be a friendly get-to-know-you meeting, but he had an agenda. Over lunch, Gil, who was then in the process of writing his book, said,

“I understand you’re a writer. You need to write.” I said I planned to get around to it later, after my children were older. He looked me straight in the eye and said, “You can’t do that!” So, I got to work.

My book, *Hooked in the Heart: Appreciating the Artistry of God in Everyday Life*, should be out soon.

NOTES

¹Gil Ahrens, *Shattered, Shaken and Stirred: Reconnecting with What Matters Most After Loss and Adversity* (Positano Press LLC, 2009), 215.

²N.T. Wright, *John for Everyone*, Part One (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2004), 52.

³Larry Crabb, *Inside Out* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 140).

⁴C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour and Co. Inc., MCMXC), 47.

⁵Ahrens, 215.