

10.21.2018 Trinity 21 (John 4:46-54)

About six weeks ago, a 10 year old boy named Xavier Cunningham, whose parents nicknamed Bear, was playing in a treehouse in Harrisonville, Missouri when a swarm of yellow jackets began to attack him and his friends. The boys quickly ran down the ladder to escape, but Xavier tripped and fell, landing face first on a foot long rotisserie skewer the boys had found earlier that day and stuck into the ground. The skewer went directly through his face narrowly missing his left eye, brain, and spinal cord, and stopped when it reached the back of his neck, just below his skull. Xavier was rushed to the hospital, and late that night doctors transferred him to the University of Kansas Medical Center where a team of 100 medical professionals began formulating a plan to save his life.

As the doctors prepared, Xavier's family turned to God in prayer, asking their church to pray for healing that would require nothing short of a miracle, and on Sunday morning, after hours of surgery, a miracle is exactly what they received. Over and over again doctors had told the family that there was a very good chance Xavier would not survive, but not only did he survive, he is expected to make a full recovery. One doctor, the Director of Endovascular Neurosurgery, described the outcome as miraculous, saying, "I have not seen anything passed to that depth in a situation that was survivable... The trajectory (of the skewer) is essentially one in a million. I just can't believe that."

I share Xavier's story with you this morning to remind you to be on the lookout for miracles, God is at work in this world, and to introduce you to the faith of Xavier's father. While his parents endured the agonizing pain of waiting to hear whether their son would live or die, Xavier's father wrote this prayer, he prayed: "My beloved Lord, my God. I do not know the plans You have for us. If it's your will to heal my son I ask that you do so quickly. But if You take him, I will forever be honored that You allowed me to call him my son, my boy, my own Bear. I will still worship You, my King. I will draw strength from You as I grieve. I will take rest in knowing You love me. I will not forsake You, my God, my King, I will forever praise You. Please have mercy on us, your will on earth as it is in heaven. Amen."

This father's heartfelt expression of faith is the goal of the Christian life. His prayer is a powerful reminder that saving faith is not merely an act of understanding, professing, or believing certain truths about God. St. James tells us that even the demons believe, and "*tremble*" (James 2:19). Even demons would agree with much of what we profess in our historic Creeds. They "believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth," but unlike Xavier's father, they don't know Him as "My beloved Lord... my God... my King..." and they do not find their rest in the knowledge of His eternal love. Compare these examples and the truth is clear: There is an infinite difference between believing, and believing, and I would suggest that our Gospel reading this morning illustrates different ways that a person might believe.

In the passage, we read about "*a certain nobleman*" who was facing what was surely his worst nightmare. This prominent nobleman may have been an officer of the king or even a man of royal descent, but his office, his power, his privilege, none of that mattered now, because the most important title this man held was that of father, and like Xavier's father, this nobleman was a dad whose child was "*at the point of death*" (John 4:47). At the beginning of this passage, that fact is what these two fathers have in common. They each have a child barely hanging on to life, and as we consider their stories, and the very different way they petition Jesus for help, we begin to recognize the difference between believing, and believing.

When you listen to the prayer of Xavier's father, it's easy to recognize the obedient, relational tone of his words. This father believes, and therefore he approaches Jesus in prayer for miraculous healing for his son, peace and strength for his family, and in his prayer proclaims the truth that no matter the outcome: "I will not forsake You, my God, my King, I will forever praise You." The nobleman, however, came to Jesus because he simply had nowhere else to turn. He was a man who had heard of the many miracles Jesus performed in Jerusalem (John 4:45), and as a father whose child was dying, sought Him out in desperate hope "*that He would come down, and heal his son*" (John 4:47). At this point, there is a great difference in what these fathers believe, but in this father's weakness and desperation we find the grace of God, and see the beginning of faith. With nowhere else to turn, the nobleman asks Jesus to "*Come down, before my child dies*" (John 4:49), not

yet aware of the truth that he is addressing God. God doesn't have to "*come down*" to heal this man's son. God speaks the Word only, and the father's son lives.

The nobleman did not yet know our Lord, but by the grace of God, in this father's desperate appeal for his son we see the smallest amount of faith, and our Lord responds to the faith of a mustard seed by casting a mountain into the sea (Matthew 17:20). Jesus said, "*Go your way, your son lives,*" and St. John tells us that "*the man believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him, and he went his way*" (John 4:50). The nobleman heard the "*Word that proceeds out of the mouth of God*" (Matthew 4:4), and he believed, and then responded as we must. He took Jesus at His Word and *went his way*. What a powerful reminder of the truth that mankind cannot view the Word of God as a bit of good advice that we can accept or reject. We must view His Word as a Divine command that must be followed.

As the nobleman traveled home in obedience to the Word of God, "*his servants met him, and told him, saying, Your son lives*" (John 4:51). Upon hearing this miraculous news, he immediately asked at what hour the boy's condition began to improve, and when his servants said it was yesterday "*at the seventh hour the fever left him*" (John 4:52), "*the father knew that it was at the same hour, in which Jesus said unto him, Your son lives;*" and here we are told once again that the nobleman "*believed, and his whole house*" (John 4:53).

The way St. John repeatedly uses the word *believe* documents this father's journey toward saving faith, and emphasizes the truth that there is an infinite difference between believing, and believing. We find that is not enough to believe, in some sort of academic way, that a Man named Jesus lived and died and rose from the grave. The Christian must, by grace, through faith, enter into a relationship with our Lord, because truly believing is a work of the whole heart.

In the end, after a grace-filled, thoughtful process of seeking God, the nobleman gave his heart to the Lord. He'd asked questions, received answers, examined and re-examined every step along the way, and through much contemplation of God's miraculous work he came to know, trust, and love

God with his whole heart. My friends, may we be so diligent as we seek greater understanding and more intimate communion with our Lord. May we find, in the faith of these fathers, assurance that we can let our every trial and sorrow rest in the hands of Jesus and trust those we love to His never failing care both in this life and the next, and may we always remember that saving faith is more than just believing the facts. Saving faith is intimate knowledge of the Truth, the Truth whom God the Father sent down from heaven to live and die and rise again to new life, to the end that He may save His children from death, and guide us into the Way of life everlasting.