

The Power of the Word
John 4:43 – 54
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
March 12, 2017

The Meaning of Effectual Calling

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.

In the penultimate verse of this passage we are told that the nobleman, together with his household, 'believed.' He, and his household, had been brought to a point of confessing faith in Jesus Christ. Note that faith is the result of the events which are narrated in the story. The sequence of events in the story is what the Puritans called 'preparatory work:' those things which awaken our understanding, convict us of sin, reveal to us our need for redemption, and convince us of the truth of Jesus Christ. This preparatory process in the lives of believers is not identical. God uses different means in each person's life to prepare the soil of the heart. But there are some common themes and recurrent threads that can be discerned. I want us to look at the story of this man's coming to faith and see what it might teach us regarding our life and how we came to believe. The first thing to note is that God uses these events in this man's life as a calling.

When I was a boy we moved into a neighborhood that was being newly developed: a great place to be a boy. There were always mounds of dirt to climb on, hills to hide behind, underground springs to try and dam, an inexhaustible variety of ways to get covered in dust, dirt and mud. I loved it. When I was playing, in the late afternoon or early evening when dinner time would approach, my mom would go to the door to call my name. Most of the time, when she called, I would immediately start heading home; but there were other times when I wanted to do one more thing and I would pretend I had not heard, and keep on playing. If I delayed, she might wait a while, and then call me again: this time louder and with greater vehemence. Her first call had not been effective. It had not resulted in my coming home. The second usually was and I would hurry home.

A calling results when we hear the voice that summons us and we respond appropriately to it. In contrast to my mother's call to me, the call of God is always effective. This is part of the message of the opening chapter of the Bible: God speaks and whatever-it-is-that-he-has-spoken comes to pass. The universe does not hesitate to comply with God's command. The power of God's calling, his spoken word, is dramatically emphasized in John chapter 11 and the raising of Lazarus from the grave. We will look at that sign more fully on Easter Sunday. For now, we note that Lazarus had been dead for four days; his body is in the tomb decaying. But then Christ's word goes forth: he calls to Lazarus, and the universe obeys. Healing and life reenter Lazarus and he is raised from the dead. Christ's word is effectual.

There is also an effectual call in the life of the believer. Effectual calling refers to God's ability and power to give new life to those who are spiritually dead. God's effectual call refers to the way in which God's purposes are fulfilled and men, women and children are brought to the point of conversion, of confession of faith in Jesus Christ. God's call brings new life. Men, women and children who hear God's call and respond to it are the recipients of new life.

In this passage this man is being brought to faith in Jesus Christ, though he himself does not know this to be the case until the end. God is at work in his life before he is aware of God's activity in his life. This is true for each of us. God was at work in our lives before we were aware of his presence, before we repented of sin and confessed faith in Jesus Christ. For this reason, the process of effectual calling is an inward work.

This past week, Lois Ann and I rejoiced at the arrival of our newest grandson: Henry Robert Gernhard. He arrived Monday morning, March 6, at 8:29 am, weighing nine pounds, eight ounces. Consider: at the moment of conception a life existed, but at conception, that life is known only to God. Over time the evidence of the life begins to show itself, until finally, at the time of birth, there is now a public knowledge and rejoicing at the new life God has given (nine months earlier). Similarly, in conversion, there is a process of spiritual awakening and of development that takes place over time. There are certain common discernable stages along the spiritual way of new life. From this story of the nobleman's coming to faith it is possible to discern some of these stages. Let's see what steps can be discerned from the story of this royal official's encounter with Jesus Christ.

The Steps of Spiritual Awakening

First, we sense our need.

We sense our need

And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill.

The first stage of spiritual awakening is that we begin to sense our spiritual needfulness. The spiritually dead do not care about God, faith, or their spiritual needs. They view the spiritual things of faith as cultural artifacts which must be endured but not embraced. They go to weddings, funerals, baptisms, and memorial services because that is what is expected by their family, friends and neighbors, but they do not find God in these things. They see themselves as spiritually independent, not needing a place for religion in their lives.

Often the first note we hear of God's call is an awareness of need. In the severity of God's mercy, it may not be an awareness of a need for ourselves, but instead for one whom we love. This man had a son who was sick unto death. His worry on his son's behalf awakened the man spiritually. It prompted him to begin to ask if there was any spiritual force at work in the universe that he could acknowledge and turn to for the sake of his son. The illness of his son begins to

waken this man from his spiritual stupor. It prompts him to begin to ask the necessary questions. I have seen a church advertisement which shows a picture of a small new born baby –looking cute the way babies can look – with the caption underneath that asks, “*Will it take a miracle to get you back to church?*”

The first step in spiritual awakening is to begin to sense our need. The second is to realize our helplessness.

We acknowledge our helplessness

⁴⁷ When 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.

This man is described as an ‘official.’ He had some level of rank and authority. He was a man of some influence. But, he did not have a great deal of power and importance. Capernaum was not insignificant, but neither was it Jerusalem, Joppa or Tyre. This man’s son was seriously ill. He knew that the matter was grave. And, he knew that his options were limited. We can be sure that he had drawn upon the skill of whatever doctors or wise men available to him. He had done what he could do with the resources available. But, in the end, his son continued to decline. The man realized the hopelessness of his situation.

The nature of the human heart is such that we always want to rely first and primarily upon ourselves. We do not care to admit dependence, especially spiritual dependence upon God. It is not surprising therefore that part of the process of coming to faith is the recognition of our own utter helplessness. We must recognize our impotence. We find ourselves helpless to act. This man was a man of power and authority in the ancient world. Yet before his son’s illness he could do nothing. It was outside the scope of the authority he wielded.

It is not enough merely to discover that we have a need. Added to that discovery must be the knowledge of our own helplessness. Twelve step groups understand this. What is the first step of every twelve step organization? The first step is the admission of failure. It is the acknowledgment of helplessness. The acknowledgment of helplessness frees us to look for assistance in places where we might otherwise have never looked. We discover the knowledge of the right place to turn in our needfulness. We must turn to Jesus.

We are given the knowledge as to the right place to turn.

⁴⁷ When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him

The reports regarding the work and ministry of Jesus had begun to spread throughout the countryside. People were talking of his manner, the miracles, and his teaching. This man heard the reports regarding Jesus Christ. In hearing these reports regarding Jesus, God was at work in this man’s heart. Now, because of the reports he had heard, this man begins to sense that it is to Jesus that he must turn.

This is a key fact. He determines to take his need to Jesus Christ. He was royal official. It is reasonable he could have approached Herod, or Pilate, or some other official governing in Galilee or Judea. There were probably pagan shrines and high places still to be found in the region, if one looked for them. With some effort, those who practice the dark arts could have been identified and found. Jesus was not the only choice available to this man in his helplessness. There were others to whom he could have gone. Wisely and rightly, he turns to Christ. Faith begins in the mind, with belief in the truth of the person of Jesus Christ. In order **to** turn to Christ you must first know **of** Christ.

It saddens me when I think of the cacophony of voices in our world today clamoring for people's spiritual attention. Ours is a veritable flea market of spiritual options: New Age, yoga, pyramids, aroma therapy, Wiccan, Gaia, Eckankar, Channeling, Tarot Cards, Transcendental Meditation, Dianetics, Taoism, Buddhism, Sacred Geometry, Course in Miracles, Wesak and the Ascended Masters – which sounds like a good name for a rock and roll group – and more. The lists go on and on. The great danger of all these philosophies, theologies, and paths to enlightenment is that they distract people from Jesus Christ. When sea turtles hatch the most dangerous crawl of their life is the first one from their nest on the beach to the sea. The sea birds know the hatching season, and they are there gobbling as many little turtles as they can before the little turtles can reach the one place that will truly nourish them. A heart that is spiritually hungry needs to be pointed to Jesus Christ, for he alone is the way to God. Sadly, there are many false spiritualities in our world ready to gobble-up the spiritually hungry, keeping them from finding the true safety of Jesus Christ.

We sense our need. We acknowledge our helplessness. We hear reports of the person of Christ. Next, we humble ourselves.

We humble ourselves

and asked him to come down and heal his son,

An awareness of spiritual need and helplessness, and knowing to turn to Jesus Christ, is the beginning of hearing God's call. The next stage is the need and willingness to humble ourselves.

This man was a man of some importance. He knows that he cannot presume upon Jesus Christ. He was used to giving orders. But, for this matter, he could not send a representative. He must go to Jesus personally. He must make the fifteen mile journey from Capernaum to Cana. Some things must be done face to face.

Because of his love and devotion to his son, I am sure that the humbling aspect of this part of hearing God's call was a small thing to him. Parents are often willing to be humiliated out of love for their children. But there was another facet of humbling he would encounter, and this one would be bitter to taste. He had to learn that God's ways are not our ways and, in this, be humbled again.

We learn that God's ways are not our ways and are humbled again.

for he was at the point of death. ⁴⁸ So Jesus said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe."

This official approaches Jesus to beg him to come with him to Capernaum in order to heal his son. He tells Jesus that his son is close to death and that he must come with him, now, before it is too late. His approach to the Lord Jesus is to tell the Lord what it is that he, the Lord, is supposed to do. The surprising response to his request is that Jesus rebukes him. We will look at Jesus' rebuke in just a moment, but for now, let me emphasize that one result of hearing God's call and coming to faith is that we enter a world unfamiliar to us. God's ways are not our ways. We come to God telling him what to do. We see our need. We know our hopes. We carry our fears. We presume to know what Jesus must do.

And yet it is the opposite that is needed. What does Proverbs 3:5 tell us? "Trust in the LORD with all your heart." Okay. We got that. Trust in God. But what is the second clause in the verse? "And do not lean on your own understanding." God's ways are not our ways. It is not our job to tell God what to do. Our job is to listen and to learn his ways.

I had a conversation with a friend once who was complaining about the expectations that he felt were being laid upon him by the priest at his Catholic Church. Dismissing the priest's words he said, *'Who is he to tell me what makes for being a good Christian? I do not have to listen to him to know what God wants of me.'* My friend, of course, was mistaken. His priest had every reason to instruct him in God's expectations upon his life. Priests and pastors are appointed by God as the spiritual shepherds of the people under their care. In old fashioned English we would refer to the priest or the pastor of a church as the 'curate.' He was the guy in charge of the cure. You do not say to your physician 'who are you to tell me how to get well?' You recognize that he is the one who has the expertise in the healing of the body and you do what he says. Similarly, pastors and priests understand, better than most people, the dynamics of the healing of the soul.

I believe that this is a decisive transforming moment in the encounter between Jesus and this unnamed official. In his rebuke Jesus is raising the question in the heart and mind of this man: do you need to see the miraculous sign in order to believe? Can you believe; will you have faith; even if you have not yet seen? It may be that this is the moment of his true discernment. Has this man been awakened? Has God given him new life? Has he heard God's effectual call? Is it that which has brought him to this place and time?

We sense our need. We see our helplessness. We learn to take the need to Jesus. We accept those things that humble us before God's throne. The next step in a person's effectual call is to keep focused on the thing that matters.

We must keep focused on the thing that matters

⁴⁹ The official said to him, “Sir, come down before my child dies.”

Faith is lived out in the real world of space and time. We are creatures, embodied in time and place. I like the humanity evident at this moment in the story. This man has heard Jesus’ rebuke. He has accepted it gracefully, appropriately. Now, politely, he reiterates his request. He has faith, but his understanding is still limited. He believes Jesus Christ has authority over sickness, *but not* death. For this reason, there is urgency to his mission. His needfulness has brought him to Christ. He knows the seriousness of his son’s situation. ‘Please sir,’ he speaks, ‘come now, before he dies.’ Jesus will now give the man an opportunity to grow in his faith.

We sense our need. We see our helplessness. We learn to take the need to Jesus. We accept those things that humble us before God’s throne. We keep focused on the thing that matters. And, we must walk by faith, not by sight.

We must walk by faith, not by sight

⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, “Go; your son will live.”

The man is desperate. He asks Jesus to accompany him back to his son and bring healing. The presence of Jesus as they travel will give him hope and comfort. The next stage of the effectual call in this man’s life is to learn to walk by faith, not by sight. Jesus tells the man to go, that his son will live. At this moment Jesus is asking him to place his trust in him, to step out in faith, trust and belief. Jesus will not go with him physically. Instead, the Lord Jesus gives to him his word and, like the word spoken at creation, his word is effective. Will Jesus’ word be believed? Will this man trust the word of Jesus?

As I said at the beginning of this message, we are watching the stages of this man’s effectual call unfold as we read this story. This man has seen his spiritual need in the illness of his son. He knows that he himself is helpless to save his son. He has come to Jesus and humbled himself: both in the walk to Cana and in the rebuke received from Jesus’ lips. And the question is: ‘Will he humble himself once more under Christ’s authority?’ This official was a man of authority in the world. He accepts the authority of Jesus’ word. He believes. He places his faith in Christ. His faith is seen in his not insisting that Jesus Christ accompany him. He has received Jesus’ word. He has believed that word. It is enough. He turns to walk home.

There are a couple of additional observations I want to make before I draw this message to a close. The first is to note the persuasive nature of authority.

The persuasive nature of authority

The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way.

Trust is an unseen thing. It is an essential thing. We are told that the man took Jesus at his word and departed. Later, when he sees his servants coming

toward him, he inquires of them as to the health of his son. As he learns the details, the validity of his faith in Jesus Christ is confirmed to him. He is told that his son recovered at about ‘the seventh hour.’ The son’s recovery was not gradual, but swift, and it occurred at around the time that the official and Jesus spoke together.

We began by speaking about an effectual call. The effectual call of God in our lives creates within us an inward change. Its result is a new desire, inclination, or disposition of the soul. Before we are called, no person is inclined to seek after God or to come to him. Everyone who hears God’s call is drawn to him by the power of his word. Our minds are awakened, our understanding is deepened. We begin to see how it is that God uses the diverse circumstances of our lives in order to reveal himself to us and confirm the reality of his presence. This man began his journey out of fear for the life of his son. He ends his journey with a son who has been healed **and** the knowledge that he has met the savior and messiah of the Jews, God’s anointed one – Jesus Christ.

Importantly, this is not the end of the story. After God awakens us to faith, we begin to see God’s hand at work in our lives and in our world.

We begin to see God’s hand at work in our lives and in our world

⁵¹ As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering.

⁵² So 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.” ⁵³ The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, “Your son will live.”

These verses are essential to the story, for they illustrate what happens after we confess faith in Jesus Christ. This man meets his servants as he is returning to Capernaum. He asks questions of his servants regarding the health of son. He is told of his son’s recovery. He asks further questions to clarify the details of his son’s recovery. He is told, “At the seventh hour the fever left him.” The man recognizes that that was the time of day when he spoke with Jesus. What is happening here is that the man’s understanding of the world and place of Jesus Christ’s authority within it, is growing and deepening. His understanding is just beginning, but he sees the power, the centrality, and the authority of Jesus.

The ancient church fathers often talked of “faith seeking understanding.” What they meant is precisely what we see in these verses. The official from Capernaum believed, and then he sought further understanding of his belief. He believed Jesus. This is evident in his turning and heading for home upon Christ’s word of assurance to him. And, when he meets the servants, he asks questions of them. His faith in Jesus is seeking greater understanding. The four key words of Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church’s discipleship process are: Worship, Connect, Know and Serve. Knowledge is always part of the discipleship process of a Christian believer. Those who follow Christ’s word are always seeking to understand his word more fully.

Finally, we end where we started. We are told that this man, together with his household, believed. Let me ask, "Do you believe?"

Do you believe?

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.

What is the journey you are on today my friend? Is there a need in your life? Do you know the hopelessness of your situation? Have you, until now, been distracted by all of the false alternatives offered in the spiritual market place today? Let those things go, and turn to Jesus Christ. He is the way to God. He is the truth of God. He is the revelation of God. He holds the keys to the kingdom. He is the way to eternal life. Believe in him and be saved.

Say 'Amen' Somebody

John 4:43 – 54

⁴³ After the two days he departed for Galilee. ⁴⁴ (For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown.) ⁴⁵ So 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.

Jesus Heals an Official's Son

⁴⁶ So 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. ⁴⁷ When 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. ⁴⁸ So Jesus said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." ⁴⁹ The official said to him, "Sir, come down before my child dies." ⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. ⁵¹ As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering. ⁵² So 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." ⁵³ The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." And he himself believed, and all his household. ⁵⁴ This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.