

The Man Who Went Home With Only A Word In His Pocket
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Date: July 9, 2017

Occasion: The Funeral of Anastasia Claire Borrasso.

Location: Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church, Parkton MD

Text: John 4:46—54

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. 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. So Jesus said to him, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” The official said to him, “Sir, come down before my child dies.” Jesus said to him, “Go; your son will live.” The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering. 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.” 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. This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.

Focus/Function:

That my hearers may leave with the hope of the gospel in their pocket, that they may trust that Anastasia Claire Borrasso rests with Christ.

Sermon:

The grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

Today is a day I never thought I would have to preach, one I never wanted the opportunity to preach. And because today is so intensely personal for me, I thought it wise to differ to someone else. This sermon by Martin Franzmann is entitled “The Man Who Went Home With Only A Word In His Pocket” and is rooted in the gospel text read a few moments ago.

The Jesus of this Gospel, at first hearing, chills all us romantics of faith. He looks at first glance like a hard man, a remote man, a stern man. How do we find our way to Him?

The Father of the dying boy rides 27 kilometers over rough terrain from Capernaum to Cana to the Man who had turned water into wine, who gave joy freely. He comes himself when he might have sent a servant, and he comes with a plea: “Come down and heal my son; he is at the point of death.”

What happens then? Jesus strangely enough treats him as a typical case, as a test case. He is typical of the Galileans: “Except you [all you Galileans] see signs and wonders, you will not believe.”

And Jesus gives him a lesson in religion, a one-sentence lecture on the theology of faith. This is cold water in the face of an agonized man.

And what happens then? The abashed agony of the father appears in his renewed plea. He does not talk about his *son* anymore. He says: “Come down ere my *child* die! My little boy, my love, my delight, my little, running, laughing, jumping boy, the light of my house, the hope of my life—he’s lying there and every breath is agony. That lecture on theology—oh, save that for later, come down *now* and heal him, my little boy!”

And what happens then? “Go thy way; thy son liveth.” Jesus sends the man home with only a word in his pocket. Back he goes over the 27 kilometers. Perhaps a saddled beast that was to have carried the Healer to the boy’s bedside trots along riderless beside him.

And what happens then? This is the unnoticed miracle in this miracle story. The man believed the words of Jesus, and he went his way.

What manner of Man is this, that not only winds and waves obey Him, but an agonized father of a dying boy picks his way home, across the ruins of his shattered hope, on a word alone? He believed; his was probably one of the minutest of the mustard seeds of faith. And no sign, no miracle—he had that word in his pocket, and that was all he had to go on for those 27 kilometers. But it is faith that sees signs and wonders. His servants meet him on the way with the good news, “Thy son liveth.” This man at Cana had spoken at the seventh hour, and at the seventh hour the deed was done.

This hard, remote Jesus, this stern Christ, has given this father more than he ever thought to ask. He has given him faith, a faith not tied to one need, a faith not tied to one sign, a faith that sees the Christ in His Word, and sees Him not as a means to an end but as the one great End, the one Pearl of great price; a faith that can find the whole Christ and live of this Christ in His Word; the kind of faith that does not remain bottled up under pressure like gas in a bottle (something that I can heat my water on for my cup of tea). This is a faith that controls the whole of life. This therefore is a faith that can move out and catch up others in its movement of adoration and gratitude: “Himself believed *and his whole house*.”

Dearly beloved, what shall we learn therefrom? as our father used to say. It is still a very good question. Two things at least:

1. Let us learn to look upon the face of Christ, even when that face looks stern. It is always the face of Him who loved us and gave Himself for us. It is always the face of Him who died for us and rose again that we might never die again. There is more compassion in this Man’s sternness,

more real love than in all the bland beamings of the pseudo-Jesuses that men construct according to their heart's desires.

2. When Jesus sent this man home with only a word to go on, with only a word in his pocket, He was ministering mightily to us all. He shifted *our* faith from signs and wonders to His word.

Do we seek signs and wonders? Is not that an ancient vice? Do *we* have this vice, we who live in a universe governed by laws? We who walk down a road on which cause and effect, cause and effect, bump each other along like a string of docile idiots? Is this our fever? Do we suffer from this ancient disease of seeking signs and wonders? Are we not leery of them? Are we not embarrassed about them when they do happen or seem to happen? Are *we* sign seekers? Each man can speak only for himself. I think we do. I do. I remember a very stern word addressed to me in my sophomore year that I've never forgotten. It was by the president of my college. He said, "The trouble with you, Franzmann, is that you want everything 'high blue.'" And I did. I wanted everything "high blue" always. And we all do. We don't want to go these 27 kilometers with only a word in our pocket. We want a "lift"; we want a "motivation"; we want an "ecstasy"; we want to walk through a dreamy landscape or ride on a cushioned palfrey of emotions.

And that too, although we have a much richer Word, a much more fully articulated Word, a much more loaded Word, than the poor nobleman had to go on. What did he know about the Jesus, the Man who could turn water into wine? The wondrous Man of Cana, what do we know about Him? We have His Word as the Word of Him who was with God and is God. We have His Word as the Word of Him through whom all things came to be. We sing "the whole world is in Thy power, O Lord, King Almighty; there is no man that can gainsay Thee." We have the Word of Him who is Light, who is Light shining invincibly in darkness, who is the true Light. We have the Word of one who gives us power to become the sons of God; we have the Word that was made flesh and dwelt among us. We have the Word of Him for whose fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. We have the Word of Him who is the Grace and Truth and the Fidelity of God in person. We have the Word of Him who is God's great Exegete, the Speller-out of the invisible God to us in our needs. We have the Word of one who is the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world, the everlasting Son of God, the house of God, the Bethel upon which the angels of God descend. We have the Word of Him who is the Giver of wine to make glad the heart of man. We have the Word of the Son of man who was lifted up in the wilderness for the salvation of a mankind under the wrath of God. We have the Giver of living water; we have the Bringer and Revealer of true worship in Spirit and in truth; we have the Savior of the world.

“Hear ye Him! Hear ye Him!”—that was the climax of the transfiguration. “Go thy way,” He tells us. Let us learn to go our way, let us learn to hear His Word in every fraction and portion of our lives, including our professional lives, in the days when we are down, way down. Let us find the faith that this poor nobleman found, the veriest, tiniest, mustard-seed faith, it may be, but *faith* that encloses the living power of God. Let us hear His word: “Thy work liveth; thy future liveth; thy vocation liveth; thy theology (thy poor, mangy little theology that seems all unintegrated), thy theology liveth! Thy poor, troubled, cramped, struggling faith liveth, though livest, and thou shalt serve Me.” Take Him at His word.

We all look for signs, even we sober exegetes. We are always looking for signs and are afraid to go by the Word. Emily Dickinson once said of poetry: “I don’t know what poetry is, but when I read something and I feel as though the top of my head has been blown off, I know that’s poetry.” And I think the same thing can be said of revelation. Revelation is hard to define, but if we meet a revelatory word and we feel as though the top of our head has been blown off, then we know that is really God at work. But we always want our heads blown off right away; we won’t wait, we won’t go the 27 kilometers (and sometimes it is 54 kilometers and sometimes 108 kilometers) of weary, slugging dictionary-paging, concordance-thumbing work. We won’t go the 27 kilometers; we want our heads blown off first. Let us learn to take this Man from Cana at His word, and go the 27 kilometers and not despair. We shall find that the top of our heads will be blown off by the strangest words in the strangest places.

Made lowly wise, we pray no more

For miracle and sign.

Anoint our eyes to see within

The common, the divine.

Amen.¹

Today we too will leave here with only a word in our pocket. A word that reminds us Anastasia will live and breathe again. A word spoken from Christ Himself, a word that we were bathed in in baptism, a word that we feast upon at the rail, a word that comes to us as we trek the 27 kilometers. And this word, it may not seem like much, but it is more than enough. For in that Word we have Christ himself, the same Christ who gathers his whole church together at the rail, making this the place where we will meet Anastasia Claire over and over again until that last great day, when the Word that Christ speaks puts her back together with breath in her lungs. That is the word we go home with today, the word in our pocket, that confidence rooted in Christ. Amen.

¹ Martin Franzmann, “The Man Who Went Home With Only A Word In His Pocket,” in *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 104-109.