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SINGING IN THE MUD

John 4:31-54

Our 3 year old grandson, Wesley, was born a month premature, so early on he was a bit behind in his development. He was late in learning to walk and beginning to speak. However, he has more than caught up. I realize that all parents and grandparents think their offspring are exceptional, but at times Wesley amazes me at things he says and does. Recently he had to go to the potty, and as he was eliminating some liquid waste he noticed that it wasn’t yellow, but clear. He said, “Look, Mama, that means I’m well hydrated.” He’s 3! How does he even know what that means? I tell you, he’s brilliant.

However, he doesn’t always get everything right. At Christmas we had a family gathering of the whole clan. Wesley has been around my mother before, but it is usually in the context of all the aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents, so he hasn’t spent a lot of time personally interacting with her. That particular day he got to spend quite a bit of time with her and really liked her. However, he was a bit uncertain about exactly who she is and what he should call her. It’s a little hard to explain a great grandparent to a 3 year old. Our granddaughters call my mom “Nana Faith.” This apparently made no sense to Wesley. He knows Nana very well, in fact she is one of his favorite people and my mother clearly is not Nana. So he was left to his own devices in coming up with a name for her. He finally arrived at one that worked for him. He decided that she is “Grampa Fake.” Well, that’s all kinds of wrong.

There is so much that a 3 year old cannot comprehend and will get wrong. When it comes to understanding life, even the wisest of us, compared to God, is more like a 3 year old than a fully mature, wise person. We get a lot wrong. That’s why the human race is the way it is. Today we are going to learn some things that are hard for humans to know at times, but they are things that are crucial to life. Let’s look at John 4:31-54.

JESUS HAD A HEALTHY DIET

Jesus’ disciples had gone into town to get some food. Jesus had remained at the well outside of town and had the conversation with the woman that we saw in the first part of this chapter. The disciples had found a Chick-Fil-A and brought back a deluxe chicken sandwich and some fries for Jesus. When they offered it to him, Jesus said, “I have food that you don’t know anything about.”

This mystified the disciples. They couldn’t see any food. He wasn’t eating anything. Did some local bring food to Jesus while they were in town? Had he already eaten it? They might have been a bit annoyed after they went into town to get food for him if he now didn’t need it because he had eaten something else.

The people around Jesus were usually focused on the practical matters of daily life, the physical needs were dominant, but Jesus was thinking and working on a different plane. He was focused on bigger issues, the spiritual ones. We saw that with the woman last week. She was all about getting physical water, while Jesus was all about the living water, that which gives real life. Here Jesus did not refer to physical food, but to that which nourishes the soul. The food he referred to was doing the will of his Father. That is what fed him, what gave him life, what motivated him and kept him going.

Laurie and I are a lot alike in many ways, but there are some ways we are quite different. One of those is that when Laurie wakes up in the morning she needs to get something into her system quickly. Coffee is the first priority, but then she needs food. Throughout the day she periodically needs to eat something, and if she goes too long she goes into a very obvious fade. She does not do well. For me, breakfast is just something that usually happens in the morning. I can usually do fine without it if I need to. In fact, I can go through long stretches during the day without eating and it doesn’t affect me much.

I suspect Jesus didn’t have that low blood sugar thing that Laurie does and that he could go for considerable periods without food. In this instance, he was saying that having the life changing conversation he had just had with that woman by the well was more energizing for him than any food he could have eaten. He was doing what the Father had for him to do and that was more energizing for him than food.

This is a theme in Jesus’ life from beginning to end. In John 5:30 Jesus said, “By myself I can do nothing: I judge only as I hear, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.” In John 8:28-29 Jesus said, “I do nothing on my own, but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who has sent me is with me, he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him.” The ultimate test came in Matthew 26:39. The night Jesus was arrested he prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup be taken from me.” He knew what was about to happen, and he wanted fervently to not have to do it. But then he said, “Yet not as I will, but as you will.” He was committed to doing the will of the Father even when it was the thing he wanted to avoid most of all. Doing the will of the Father was his food, right to the very end. I am going to come back to this idea as we think about the implications of this passage in a few minutes.

THE FIELDS WERE RIPE

Jesus then told the disciples that the fields were ripe for the harvest. He told them he was sending them into the fields to reap where they had not sown. God had prepared the crop, and they were now going to get to gather it in. There is an obvious application that they were to carry his message to people, as we are. But there’s an implication of Jesus’ words that are easy to miss. Why would Jesus say that in that context? There was the discussion about food, and all of a sudden Jesus talked about the fields being ripe for the harvest. There was no obvious reason for that and no transition into a new topic. Why did Jesus bring this up?

We get a clue from verse 39. “Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony.” Jesus was about to reap a harvest, but it was a harvest of Samaritans. That is not something his disciples would have been happy about. They had their own personal prejudice against Samaritans to deal with, plus there is the PR angle. What if word gets out that many Samaritans are becoming Jesus followers? That’s not going to make Jewish people, who have a problem with Samaritans, think believing in him is a good thing.

We already saw last week that there was considerable animosity between Jews and Samaritans. For these Jewish men having Samaritans join the Jesus movement was not a good thing. It would be a little like if an extreme left candidate for the Senate got an endorsement from Donald Trump. I believe Jesus was preparing his followers for this influx of people who were different, people they had issues with. It was a statement that the good news of Jesus isn’t just for good, religious Jewish people, it is for everyone, even Samaritans. Later it would get even worse when they found out it was for Gentiles, even hated Romans.

This was something the disciples of Jesus should have understood after following him. He had a tendency to reach out to the outcasts, the unacceptable people, the people everyone looked down on. The disciples should have noted they were an unlikely group of religious leaders, for they were mostly blue collar, uneducated, no name people, and some of them were from the underside of society.

One of my favorite Christmas carols that we sang just a month ago is *O Holy Night*. There is a line in that song that says about Jesus, “Truly he taught us to love one another, and in his name all oppression shall cease.”

Marxism, which is somehow still pervasive and influential even though it has proven to be both wrong and one of the great evils of history, claims that the one unchanging fact of the human race is the constant presence of oppression and power struggles. It divides all people into two groups, the oppressors and the oppressed. It claims all human relations come down to the struggle for power. Any talk of universal ideals like freedom, equality and morality are nothing more that disguised attempts to wield power.

That song, though, claims that in the name of Jesus all oppression will cease, because Jesus taught us to love one another. The obvious objection to that would be that oppression has not ceased since Jesus came into the world. Oppression is still everywhere in our world. In fact, the Christian faith has been in many instances, the cause of the oppression. Too often the church has been the oppressor. Sadly, we have to admit that is true. We can unfortunately find tons of examples of Christians even oppressing Christians as well as non-Christians. Does that mean that the good news of grace in Christ is just more thinly disguised oppression? No, it doesn’t.

Humans have an oddly perverse talent for turning things into weapons. When someone creates a new technology, you can bank on the fact that someone, somewhere, is looking for a way to use it as a weapon. Does that make the new technology evil? In 1903 two brothers from Ohio became the first people to successfully invent a machine that could fly under its own power. By World War I, little more than a decade later, that new invention was being used as a weapon. Does that make airplanes evil? I once read a terrible news story about an assault in which a man attacked another with a baseball bat. Does that make baseball bats evil? Should someone start a campaign to pass a law banning baseball bats? No, a baseball bat is an innocuous piece of sports equipment, until someone decides to weaponize it. An airplane is an innocuous form of transportation, until someone seeks to weaponize it. The problem isn’t with the bat or the airplane, it is with the person who wants to use it as a weapon.

Humans can even try to weaponize the gospel of grace. The problem is not with the gospel, it is with the people who try to use it as a weapon. This story reminds us that the good news of Jesus is indeed good news, for it is intended to end oppression. It is intended to free individuals from the oppression of fear and guilt and condemnation and alienation from God, and bring them into forgiveness, God’s love and acceptance and freedom. It is intended to end oppression of humans by other humans, because as the song said, Jesus taught us to love one another. We see that in this story. Jesus was telling his followers that a group of people whom they hated, were now going to be their brothers. He was saying his good news is for everyone. It is for the most hated groups, it is for those least respected in society, those who are the outcasts, the ones looked down on. They are all welcome in the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Even the hated Samaritans? Yes, even them, and look, here they come now into the kingdom!

THE DAD BELIEVED

There is one more story in this chapter that has a truth we should pay attention to. Jesus left that town in Samaria and went back to the town of Cana in Galilee up north. While he was there he was approached by a man described as a royal official or a government official. The man lived in Capernaum on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, a little more than 10 miles away. His son was seriously ill, close to death. This man asked Jesus to come to Capernaum with him and heal his son.

This man was an influential, likely powerful man. But his son was dying. The man likely would have had little or nothing to do with an itinerant wood worker turned preacher from the backwoods under normal circumstances. But this man’s son was dying. Like any parent he would have done anything to save his son. I’ve been there, and I know the fear and desperation that brings. He had heard stories that this Jesus was healing people. Maybe it was grasping at straws, but they’d tried everything else and nothing worked. It might have been a faint hope, but Jesus was the only hope this guy had. So he walked many miles and humbled himself before this no name preacher begging him to come to his home and save his son.

Jesus’ response to this worried, grieving man seems almost abrupt. He simply says, “Go, your son will live.” The man expected more than that. Surely Jesus would have to at least come close to the boy to heal him. When Jesus told him to just go home and that his boy would be fine, it left him in a difficult spot. Maybe Jesus couldn’t actually do anything about the boy. What if Jesus just said that to get rid of him? What if the man went back home and found that his son was no better, maybe even worse? To his credit, the man did what Jesus told him to do. At a normal walking pace it would have taken him 3 to 4 hours at least to get home. Before he could get there he was met by some of his servants who brought him great news. His son had recovered and he was fine! He asked when the boy had begun to get better, and it was exactly at the time when Jesus told him his son was going to be all right.

What sticks out in this story in addition to Jesus’ power to heal is this man’s faith. He demonstrates the true essence of faith. He believed what Jesus said and acted on it. He took Jesus at his word. If Jesus says your son is fine and you should go see him, then you trust that is true and head home. That is the real core of faith for all of us. It is taking Jesus at his word, it is believing what he says and acting on it, just like that worried father did.

IMPLICATIONS

JESUS WAS FUELED BY A MISSION

I find myself in an unusual condition that I have never experienced before, at least not for an extended period of time. One of the side effects of the treatment I am receiving is it totally suppresses appetite. I never feel hungry. I never feel like eating. In fact, lately it’s gone from being neutral, not being hungry, to the opposite. Even the thought of eating makes me feel a bit nauseous. One of the other effects of the treatment is it makes me fatigued. The problem is, though I don’t want to eat, if I don’t eat, I don’t have fuel, meaning energy. So it makes the fatigue even worse. I have to eat in order to have energy to keep going.

What Jesus said was that there was something he needed to fuel his life, to give him energy to keep going. Only it wasn’t physical food, it was his mission, to do the will of the Father. What energized him, what filled him with passion, was the mission of doing the Father’s will. All of us should understand that, for having a mission is what gives us passion in life as well.

Just think of some of the things Jesus’ mission did for him. Matthew 14:1-12 tells the awful story of how John the Baptist was executed. In verse 13 Jesus gets the news about John. “When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.” Jesus was heartbroken and he wanted some time alone to deal with his grief. But look at what happened according to verses 13-14. “Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.” We know from verse 15 that continued all day into the evening. How was Jesus able to keep going? He had a mission that the Father had given him, and that mission gave him the passion and energy to keep going even when he was tired and at a low point emotionally.

My son, Toby, was a typical college man, meaning he avoided early morning classes if at all possible so he could sleep in. I was amazed that at one point he chose of his own will to start getting up very early to go to sessions that started even before the earliest classes. These sessions took place outside, very early in the morning in the middle of winter when it was cold and often wet. Toby had loved playing football in high school, and he missed playing the game. So well into his college career he chose to try to walk on to the football team. They had practice sessions early in the morning. He also had to go to the weight room and do grueling workouts there every day, plus they had meetings at night. He had to work ridiculously hard and put in many hours, and he did it willingly because he had a mission. He wanted to play football. Without that mission there is no way on earth you could have gotten him out of bed on those cold early mornings. Having a mission gave him energy and motivation, just like it did for Jesus.

Having a mission enabled Jesus to avoid getting distracted. In Matthew 4:2 we learn, “After fasting 40 days and 40 nights, he (Jesus) was hungry.” Well, duh. He hadn’t eaten anything for almost 6 weeks, so he had to have been ravenous. Satan chose that time when Jesus was in a weakened condition, to attack at what he figured would be Jesus’ most vulnerable point. He said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” That sounds like he was questioning Jesus’ identity, but he wasn’t. The grammar tells us what he said was, “Since you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread.” It was a helpful suggestion. Hey, I know you’re starving, but you have the power to fix that in a nano second. Jesus said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Jesus had been told by the Father to fast and to trust him to provide food when he chose to do so. Would he do the Father’s will, or would he choose to take care of his own needs and desires? He had a legitimate need for food. But the question was would he put fulfilling that need before doing what the Father commanded him to do? That would be a crucial question later when he would have to choose between keeping himself safe and avoiding unimaginable pain on the one hand, and doing his Father’s will, in that case being tortured and executed for us, on the other. His mission enabled him to not pursue rabbit trails.

His mission enabled him to deal with disappointment and setbacks. In Mark 3 Jesus was drawing huge crowds everywhere he went. He was becoming immensely popular. However, verse 21 tells us, “When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’” Well that’s just great. His own family thinks he is looney tunes, so bad that they need to take charge of him because he clearly is not competent to control his own life. That had to feel great, don’t you think? Your own family thinks you’re crazy. How do you deal with that kind of disappointment?

Do you know how discouraging it is when people who should be in your corner don’t believe in you. I can tell you from personal experience that really hurts. It makes you feel like quitting. I’ve been through that, but I’ve never faced it from my family. That could easily destroy you. His family wasn’t alone. Verse 22 says, “The teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He is possessed by Beelezebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons.’” They say, “Oh, no, he’s not crazy. It's worse than that. He is demon possessed!”

The leaders of his people, the most respected and educated people in his culture, were calling him demonic and his family thought he was as crazy as a guy who is convinced he’s Teddy Roosevelt. In verses 33-34 when his family came to take him home he was told that his mother and brothers were outside looking for him. He responded, “Who are my mother and my brothers? Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.’” How did he deal with the crushing disappointment of his own family not believing him and the hardship of being opposed and slandered by the leaders of his own nation. He focused on the mission, doing the will of the Father, and kept right on.

Would you like to have a life of energy and passion, to be strong enough to overcome all disappointments and obstacles? Of course. Who wouldn’t? The key to it is having a mission. But to truly empower your own life it can’t be just any mission. The key to having the most passion, to filling every moment of your life with meaning and energy, is living for the same mission Jesus pursued. It is having your life fueled by the goal and pursuit of doing God’s will in everything.

A few weeks ago I had a rather rough week. I felt truly terrible, and to make it worse, it looked to me like I was going down the same road I took when I got my first treatment, which proved to be a train wreck. To avoid experiencing long term damage they had to stop the treatment, and it looked like this was going to be a rerun. This not only had the frustrating effect of enduring treatments that are making me feel terrible, but it raised the specter that I might not be able to tolerate the treatment, leaving me with few good options. The doctor told me I need to come in to see him. So the day of that appointment Laurie and I drove down to see the doctor. As we were going what I was feeling most of all was, “I don’t want to be doing this.” I didn’t want to have to go to see the doctor, I didn’t want to feel as bad as I was feeling, and I didn’t want to have a disease that is controlling my life and has the potential of ending it. But I don’t control whether I have to deal with this disease. That is totally out of my control. I realized the only thing I control is how I respond to this situation. I could feel sorry for myself, be mostly unhappy and bitter because of this lousy thing that has happened, which would just make me pathetic. Or I could say, “I don’t understand this, but if it is your will that I go through this, Lord, then I want to do your will and do it in a way that will bring you glory.” That is my mission, after all. I’ve preached that for many years. The difference is large, for when I see this as part of my mission it gives me strength, ability to endure, and not just to endure but to conquer. It gives me the ability to be fully alive, even when I felt like death warmed over.

FAITH IS CRUCIAL TO THE MISSION

Admiral William McRaven served as a Navy Seal for 37 years, eventually becoming the commander of Special Operations Command. He tells great stories, and draws life lessons from his experiences as a Seal. One of those stories came out of his time going through Seal training. The training is 6 months of being wet, cold, uncomfortable and exhausted. The peak of it is the infamous Hell Week, where trainees go through non-stop exercises with basically no sleep for a week. The most memorable moment of that week for him came on Wednesday. All the trainees got in their rigid inflatable boats and paddled from the Seal base in Coronado down to the mud flats between Tijuana and San Diego. They had races, exercises, wrestling matches all in the thick, cold mud. As the sun was going down their instructors found some egregious fault with them and ordered them to all get in the mud with their arms linked. They ordered them to go into the mud so deep that only their heads were above the mud. We all know that San Diego has a relatively mild climate and a reputation for being warm, but we also know in the winter it can be really cold at night, especially when the wind blows. The instructors told them they were going to be there all night if necessary. He said they were thoroughly soaked, covered in mud, cold beyond description and absolutely miserable. He said every one of them was shivering uncontrollably, teeth chattering, and the moaning of those suffering sailors was so loud it drowned out everything else. And there was no end in sight. One of the instructors said to them, “I see you guys are really suffering. I feel terrible for you. We’ve built a fire over here. We’ve got hot coffee, even some hot cocoa. I want to help you guys out. If just 5 of you will quit, then we will let all of you get out of the mud, come over and get warm and have some coffee. All I need is for 5 of you to quit.” McRaven said the temptation to quit felt overpowering. The guy next to him started to pull away, clearly deciding he’d had enough. McRaven tried to keep him from quitting, but then one guy in the group started singing. He said the singing was terrible, off key, but loud and enthusiastic. Then another guy joined that first guy, singing along. Then a third guy began singing. It wasn’t long before all of them were singing. The instructors threatened them that if they didn’t stop singing, they would prolong their time in the mud, but they kept singing. He said the singing somehow took their minds off their misery and self pity and gave them hope that they could endure. Hope was what they needed. And endure they did.

The lesson that he took away from that ordeal was that hope was crucial. Having hope that they actually could endure and make it, enabled them to keep going when everything within them was screaming that they should give up. Maybe that’s why singing together has always been such an important part of Christian worship. But we’re not always going to be together and be able to sing when we face hard times in life, and singing may not be enough. We will always need hope.

Where do we get that hope? We get it by faith, the kind of faith the dad displayed in the story at the end of the chapter. Faith that believes what Jesus tells us, that takes him at his word, even when there is no immediate obvious evidence that what he says is true. It means trusting that what Jesus says is true when he says we are forgiven, loved by God. It means believing what Jesus says is true when he says God has a will for our lives and his will is for our good. It means believing that what Jesus says is true when he promises the fullest, best possible life will come from living for his will, not our own whims and desires. It means believing it is true when he says if we will hope in him he will give us the strength to endure, to soar like eagles when faced with the mud flats.

Faith is essential to hope. Hope is essential to being able to keep on. Keeping on is essential to having the life full of meaning and passion that we want, and God wants us to have. So as that worried father did, let’s take Jesus at his word and go on our way, focused on the mission of doing the Father’s will above all else.