

John 4:43-54

A few months ago I had the opportunity to go to a Tommy Emmanuel concert with some friends, at the Manship Theatre in downtown Baton Rouge. Now, for those of you who do not know, Tommy Emmanuel is, without a doubt, one of the greatest guitar players that has ever walked the face of the earth. And I am not exaggerating. If anything, that's an understatement. What this man can do with and on a guitar is just mind-boggling. You, literally, have to hear it to believe it.

Traveling with Tommy was an Australian guitarist - Troy Cassar-Daley - who is also a gifted guitar player and singer in his own right and a winner of numerous music awards in Australia where he is primarily known as a country and western singer.

Before the concert began, I was talking with a friend of mine who was working at the ticket desk about Tommy Emmanuel, and asked him if he had had a chance to hear him yet - to which my friend responded, "Yeah, I heard him warming up earlier." And so I asked him what he thought because he himself is an accomplished guitar player. And he said something along the lines of, "Yeah, he's pretty good."

Now, at that point, I thought to myself, "I don't know who he heard earlier, but I am quite certain it wasn't Tommy Emmanuel. It was probably his warm up act." And the reason I said those things was because there is simply no way this friend, who knows a good bit about guitar playing himself, could listen to a player the likes of Tommy Emmanuel and say "He's pretty good". The phrase "pretty good" and Tommy Emmanuel don't belong in the same sentence. To describe Tommy Emmanuel as a "pretty good guitar player" would be like saying that Michael Jordan was a "pretty good basketball player", or that Katherine Hepburn wasn't "half-bad" as an actress. To speak about these people in such a way might, on the surface, look like a compliment. But anyone who has ever heard Tommy Emmanuel play, or seen Michael Jordan's highlight films, or watched Katherine Hepburn on the big screen would know that to use such mediocre language to describe their talent and art was anything but a compliment.

And so it was with my friend on this particular night. I knew he hadn't actually heard Emmanuel play. And I knew that when and if he ever did, he would describe him in an entirely different fashion, and he would know and readily admit himself that describing Tommy Emmanuel as merely being "pretty good" simply will not do.

And a similar sort of dynamic is what lies behind the passage that is before us this morning. In John 4:43-54 we have an account of a person whose initial response to Jesus - while seeming to accord him a *certain* level of recognition - nevertheless did not give him the recognition or honor that was *really* his due, or that was in accordance with who he *truly* was.

And so it is that we will be looking at this theme of responding to Jesus and the different forms that such responses can actually take..... Before we turn to that, let's pray together....

Father in heaven, please hear our prayers now for you to come and superintend this time. We are in your hands, we are assembled together, under the authority of your Word. Would you please now take that living and active word and use it to fashion us into the image of your Son, and into a people who love you with ALL of our heart, or at least MORE of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen....

Now, as you've heard me say before - *ad nauseam* - John has written this gospel for the specific purpose of seeing people come to faith in Jesus Christ and so receive the blessing of eternal life with him. And, while John certainly desires this result for *all* who might read his gospel, he seems to have been targeting, in particular, the Jews that were scattered throughout the Roman Empire, especially those near where he was most likely writing *from* - the city of Ephesus.

In order to achieve this goal, John has been doing a number of things thus far in his gospel. For one thing, he has tried to reveal - through various means - the *identity* of Jesus as one who was fully man, but also fully God - with God and even equal to God, his Father. Along with that John has shown us, in several different installments, what responding appropriately and legitimately to this truth about Jesus looks like, namely:

...it is a *consequence* of a person's first being born again as a result of God's Spirit mysteriously and sovereignly working within him/her and...

...it is *evidenced* by faith and trust in Jesus as God's Messiah sent to save sinners, by a life of obedience that flows *from* that faith, and by a person's willingness to own Jesus publicly and unashamedly before others

And then, along with showing his readers what a *legitimate and appropriate* response to Jesus looks like, John has, along the way, given us glimpses of what an *inappropriate and insufficient* response to Jesus looks like. And of course, whenever that sort of thing happens, it is always a personal tragedy for the people involved.

But John has not shown us these things so that we might just see the tragedy of people NOT responding to Jesus. Rather, he also gives us a *context* in which we might understand these inappropriate responses to Jesus, and so begin to see something of how even these things fit into God's overall purposes.

Now, you might be saying, "What's he talking about?" Let me try and show you and, in the process, hopefully set us up for a fuller understanding of the passage before us. Firstly, look back at John, chapter 1, verses 9-11,

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own,¹ and his own people² did not receive him....

So, there it is. Right at the beginning of this gospel, within the first few verses, John makes it clear to his readers that this is a story about a person who was fully God and fully man, who came to his own people - the Jews - and yet in the end they did not receive him for who he was.

In other words, right from the start, John is giving away part of the story's conclusion, he's given us a *flash forward* to the closing chapters and so has revealed a significant part of where this story is heading. And then, after doing that in the first 18 verses, John sort of "rewinds the tape", goes back to the beginning of Jesus' ministry, so that we can see *how* these things actually unfolded, how the story played out.

Well, we don't have to wait long before we start seeing how this rejection came about. In fact, the first hint of this coming rejection is seen in the very first chapter when a man who eventually became a disciple of his - Nathanael - initially responds to reports about Jesus with the very sarcastic and condescending remark, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

We then get a *further* glimpse of it in the way that some responded to his cleansing of the temple, and then in chapter 2, verses 23-25, we get still more glimpses of it when we see people responding to Jesus with the sort of reception that he clearly did not regard as adequate.

And as we continue working through John, we will see this theme of rejection become stronger and stronger, including further glimpses of it in the passage before us this morning. And by the time we get to the end of John we will see it come to *full bloom* in the ultimate rejection that sent Jesus to the cross - where the Lamb of God sent to save the world would do just that. And so the individual rejections along the way are seen to be part of an ultimate rejection that, in the purposes of God, brokered the forgiveness and redemption of those he came to save.

And if we were to leave the gospel of John and turn to the Book of Romans - which we don't have time to do - we would see there Paul's explanation of a *further* purpose for this historical rejection of Jesus by the Jews - namely, how God used that rejection to move his kingdom purposes beyond the bounds of ethnic Israel and to the Gentiles, i.e., to the rest of the world. Paul's letter shows, among other things, how because of God's promises, it was necessary that God's Messiah would first come THROUGH and TO a particular people but that, because of those very *same* promises, it was also necessary that the kingdom rule and reign *inaugurated* by that Messiah would shed its Jewish birth clothes and move out to the very ends of the earth.

All of which helps us to see even more clearly the place and purpose of the story about Jesus and the Samaritan woman and the Samaritan townspeople. That story appears right before the passage we are about to look at - as well as those that follow - for at least two reasons. Firstly, to demonstrate this reality that the good news of God's kingdom really *was* intended for more than just the Jewish people and, secondly, it highlights the contrast between the Gentile and Jewish response to Jesus. As one writer explains it,

The Samaritans saw Jesus for what he was and received him joyfully as the Messiah, the Savior of the world.....but his own people, the covenant community, either actively opposed him or refused to be interested in him beyond a fascination for miracles and, later, for politics.

At any rate, all of *that* is the wider context within which we need to see and understand what we find in John 4:43-54, to which I invite you now to turn. Listen, your God is speaking.....

(Read passage)

Now in this section, verses 43-45 are transitional verses in that they are wrapping up the account of Jesus' time in Samaria and, at the same time, are positioning us to move on to the next account. In these verses we see Jesus leaving the Samaritan village to travel northward, back to the region of Galilee - his home turf - and in particular to the city of Cana which, as John reminds us in vs 46, is where the first miracle in this region took place - the turning of water into wine.

Now perhaps the most crucial thing to note in these opening verses is the parenthetical remark in vs 44 about a *prophet having no honor in his hometown*, which is then followed by the last thing you expect to *hear* after a statement like that - "So when he came to Galilee, the Galileans *welcomed* him". A "prophet has no honor in his hometown" followed by "the Galileans *welcomed* him?" What's going on? Keep reading....

"....the Galileans welcomed him, *having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast. For they too had gone to the feast.*" What feast is this? The Passover feast mentioned in John 2:13, to which, apparently, a number of these Galileans had gone. And having gone to that feast, then they would have witnessed Jesus' cleansing of the temple. And they would likely have witnessed or at least heard about *other* things that went on, which John has not recorded exhaustively for us because, as he points out in chapter 20, that is not his purpose in writing this Gospel. It was never his intention to record an encyclopedic description of Jesus' life but rather a *selective* description that would be sufficient to accomplish his purpose of encouraging people to believe in Jesus as the Messiah.

And so the passage says that these Galileans welcomed Jesus *because* of the things that they had *witnessed* at Jerusalem, which would have included his clearing of the temple, but which also would have no doubt included other things, such as people being miraculously healed. In other words, this Jesus could put on quite a show and they were eager to see more.

The fact that this was indeed their perspective is seen in Jesus' response to the official in verse 48 - "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe". The word "you" in that verse is plural in the Greek so that, really, a more *helpful* rendering of it would be, "Unless *you people*.....unless y'all see signs and wonders, you people will not believe". His words there were clearly intended for more than just the official but were, in fact, aimed at the other people all around him - these Galileans whose great welcome we have just been told about but who seemed to have been drawn, in the main, by a fascination with signs and miracles, rather than by any sort of commitment to the *person* of Jesus. As Leon Morris writes,

“...the enthusiasm of the Galileans was not soundly based. It was dependent on the wonder arising from their sight of the signs, not on a realization that Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world. Their very acceptance of him was thus in its way a rejection. They gave him honor of a sort, but it was not the honor that was due to him.

This reality, then, shows us how we are to understand Jesus' curious remark about a prophet having no honor in his hometown. Rather than seeing that statement as an explanation for why Jesus might have *avoided* going to a certain place - which is how we are sometimes tempted to read it - but rather than seeing it that way, we are meant to understand that it is the fact of his inevitable rejection that *required* his going to be among his own people in the various cities in Galilee. As we have already seen, Jesus came to do his Father's will and to fulfill his Father's purposes which meant that his being rejected was not merely a tragedy - which it certainly was - but it was also a *necessity* - within the purposes of God.

And so as Jesus leaves Samaria and re-enters his home territory of Galilee, he does so with his eyes wide open, knowing that he will ultimately be treated like every other prophet that God sent to his people in the past. And knowing this, he was able to see the reception of these Galileans for what it really was. On the surface, it looked like acceptance, but underneath it all, it was a kind of rejection - all dressed up in fancy clothes. And throughout all of this we hear the echo of John 2:23-24,

*“...many believed in his name **when they saw the signs he was doing**. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people...”*

And all of this further assists us in understanding what is going on in this passage and in particular between Jesus and this “official” from Capernaum - which was also in Galilee and was located about 25 kilometers northeast of Cana - about a 2 day journey at the time.

Now, as Carson points out, the Greek word for “official” here is *basilikos* which is related to the word *basileus* - or “king” - and so this is most likely a person who was attached to the one ruling the region at that time. That would have been Herod Antipas, who was most likely a Jewish man, appointed to be, essentially, a sort of puppet dictator, looking after the place on behalf of the Roman authorities. And so this official is likely one who worked in the court of this king and may well have been Jewish too, or he could have been a gentile. Whatever the case, whether Jew or gentile, the fact that he worked in the service of the hated Roman authorities would have meant that he would have been an outsider and poorly regarded by the Jews in that region - whatever his ethnicity.

At any rate, this man comes to Jesus, obviously in deep distress about his son's critical condition. And his approach, at least initially, does not seem to be the result of his personal convictions about Jesus being the Messiah of God but simply out of desperation. He has nowhere else to go, he has exhausted all medical treatments, and has simply heard through the grapevine that this Jesus had the ability to do miraculous things. And so he asks Jesus to *come to Capernaum* in order to heal his son.

Jesus' initial response to the man, as we have seen, is to issue a commentary on the sort of "faith" or responsiveness which seems to have characterized this man's initial encounter and which, beyond that, Jesus regarded as indicative of the manner in which the Galileans *in general* had responded to him – merely as some sort of miracle worker, as the guy who can fix your problem, as the one who can do what others cannot. To be sure, it was a kind of faith - but one which seems to have been dependent upon signs and wonders - a faith that really wants some sort of proof before it will be exercised. As one writer puts it,

...Jesus detects in the royal official a welcome and a faith that desires a cure but that does not truly trust him. Indeed, the royal official, in Jesus' view, exemplifies what is wrong with the Galileans as a whole...

Interestingly enough, the official is not put off by Jesus response and simply repeats his request that Jesus come and heal his boy, to which Jesus responds, "Go; your son will live". At this point the official turned to go back home and, in that simple movement, shows that perhaps there is something more going on with him. His initial response to Jesus, to be sure, seemed to be typical of what Jesus expected from the Galileans.

But then his willingness to accept that his boy would be healed - simply because Jesus said so - and *without* Jesus actually going TO Capernaum seems to indicate that there was at least *something* different about this man.

Well, then we read that as the official was on his way back home, he runs into his servants coming from the other direction to tell him that his son has recovered and, after a little questioning, the official works out that the time of his boy's recovery coincided exactly with the moment at which Jesus declared that he would live.

At this stage John tells us that "he himself believed, and all his household.", which we have to stop and think about. Because the first time we are told that this man "believed" it seems, in context, that his belief was confined fairly narrowly to a belief that this miracle worker named Jesus was able to heal his son.

But this second time it seems that John *must* be referring to something different, or at least something *more*. After all, it would not make sense to describe him for a second time as believing in the very thing that is already said to have believed in. Further there is the comment about his whole family "believing" which is even less likely as a reference to the son's recovery since they would have all been there to witness it and, therefore, it would seem silly to describe them as believing in something that has just happened right in front of them. Of course they would believe that. How could they do otherwise?

What seems more plausible then is that, even though John does not spell it out in detail to us, the belief referred to here is, in fact, believing that Jesus was more than just a healer but was the One sent by God, not merely to heal people but to actually *save* them.

And so, whether a gentile or a despised Jew, we see in this official a response to Jesus which, initially, seems to have been very much like the general response of his own people to him but which then, became something more substantial. And the fact that he would have, at best, been regarded as an outcast in that culture is important because it further illustrates the truth that even when Jesus was among his own people, it was the fringe dwellers and the despised who seemed to have responded to him more legitimately than those in the mainstream of Jewish society.

Now, for the John's original readers - the Jews who were scattered across the Roman empire and away from their homeland - hearing and reading these things would have been very significant. It seems to me that what John would have wanted his Jewish readers to see in all this, among other things, was Jesus' attitude toward those whose response to him seems to have been based merely on the miraculous things he did. He wanted them to see that while Jesus clearly did not completely reject such responses, he nevertheless DID clearly regard them as lacking and certainly inferior to a response that was not dependent on such things. As Jesus says much later in this gospel, in chapter 20,

"...Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed..."

To these Jews, then, who were living away from their home, after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and quite incapable of ever witnessing the amazing things that Jesus did - to these Jews it would have been deeply important for them to see that the faith that they were being called to was not a foolish, whimsical, inferior sort of faith but was that which Jesus himself regarded as the highest and best sort of faith. It was neither *necessary* nor *desirable* that their faith be based upon their being eyewitnesses to all that Christ did. Simply responding to the word OF Christ and the word ABOUT Christ was more than enough.

Even further, the whole movement of this Gospel up to this point would be helping them to see how it came about that the Messiah, instead of conquering his foes allowed himself to be crucified by them and, still further, why he was now being preached as the Savior of the *world*, and not just the Jews, and how the general rejection of Jesus by his own people fit into all of that.

And, of course, all these things are equally significant for God's people today. It is as important for us as it was for the people in John's day to understand the bigger picture of what God was doing in and through his Messiah - and how these individual accounts of people either responding to him or rejecting him are *integral* both to God's plan to save his people by atoning for their sin and, equally, to his plan to then take that message and that salvation from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

What's more, the reminder of the sufficiency and, beyond that, the *primacy* of a faith that is not dependent upon, OR the product of some fascination with the amazing and the miraculous, is also a timely one for us. Because we, even more than the Jews in John's day, live well beyond the time that Jesus walked the earth and hundreds of years *after* his resurrection and *after* all the amazing and wonderful things he did.

And I think that sometimes the seeming greatness of that gap between then and now can make God's people restless and nervous, with the result that they begin to question the value of their word-based faith, and then begin to try and artificially generate something else, something more tangible that will calm their fickle and doubting hearts. And so in place of a dependence and trust in the word of Christ, they place a growing dependence on some sort of experience that will validate them and their faith – to themselves and to the world.

Curiously enough, much of the evangelical church in the latter half of the 20th century seems to have completely lost sight of Jesus' disdain for that sort of faith – a faith that was the birth-child of a dependence on signs and wonders. Indeed, in direct *contradiction* to that reality there was an entire “signs and wonders” movement that began about 30 years ago - and which is still going in some quarters - that not only ignores these realities but, amazingly, turns Jesus' teaching on its head - producing whole armies of people who look for, and depend upon, and yearn for, the amazing and miraculous - which inevitably results in the cheapening of the very idea of the miraculous.

Finally, there is at least one other thing in this passage that is deeply significant for us and it revolves around this whole notion of the importance of recognizing Jesus for who he truly is, and the ultimate worthlessness of not doing that. We don't want to be like those who responded to Jesus - after a fashion. We don't want to find ourselves among that class of people who seem to have responded to some lesser vision of who he truly was - both because that sort of response is, in itself, insufficient - as this passage shows - and because that is the sort of response that Jesus himself rejected because it was, in fact, a rejection of *him*.

People might think that they are doing Jesus great favors by calling him a “great man”, or a “miracle worker”, or a “great teacher” or even “one of the greatest men who ever lived - along with Buddha, Mohammed, Aristotle, etc”. People who say such things about Jesus might feel that they are paying him a high compliment but, in fact, they are doing nothing of the sort.

Jesus is not interested in adulation, or people thinking well of him, or giving him a lot of credit or in being listed as one of the greatest and most influential people of all time. He wants, and has every right to want, his people to believe in him *for who he truly is*. Nothing less, ultimately, will be of any worth - not for Jesus, and not for the person doing the “believing”. Jesus is not looking for people who will slap him on the back and tell him what a great person he is. He is looking for people who will fall on their knees and acknowledge him for the great *Savior* that he is.