

**August 5, 2018**

**John 6: 24-27**

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, go with us into our worship of you through the study of your word. Enlighten us and let us not twist it into something it doesn't say. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

### **Walking the Walk**

There is no doubt that the Internet has made the world smaller. Videos bring instant attention to a crime, an arrest, a cause, a song, a dance.

Years ago, it was hey, *Macarena!*

Then people all over the world were playing and singing to *Stand By Me*.

The most recent song to go viral was Drake's "In My Feelings." People posted videos of themselves jumping out of moving cars to dance alongside to "Kiki, do you love me?"

Then Greenville dentist Rich Constantine did his version of the dance, called it "In My Fillings," and posted it to his Facebook page. It got 74 million views. Then he followed it up with another that got 8 million.

Lots of people have produced videos in the hope that they would go viral. I imagine very few of them do. But it's hard to tell what's going to excite the viewing public.

I would have never predicted the dancing dentist.

And then, there are events or stories that are not intentional or manufactured. They authentically capture the world's attention for entirely different reasons. Such as the Thai youth soccer team stranded in a watery cave for two weeks.

And so we come to a story fueled by Facebook and reported by *The Washington Post* in July. It may not give the dancing dentist a run for his money. But it should.

Walter Carr is a 20-year-old, African-American college student who lives near Birmingham, Alabama. He got a job with a moving company, Bellhops, and was to report for his first day of work at a house 20 miles from his apartment.

But the day before he was to start the job, his car broke down. He frantically texted friends to ask for a ride, but no one could help him.

Walter needed that job to pay his rent. And he decided there was only one way to keep it: He would walk the 20 miles.

He Google Mapped the route, and learned it would take him eight hours on foot. He had been a cross-country runner in high school and figured he might make it in less.

That evening, he ate a meal of bologna and eggs and lay down for a nap. Then at midnight, he woke up and started out.

He jogged some. He walked some. When a dog threatened him, he threw a ball to distract him and ran on. When his legs began to burn, he focused on the money he needed to pay his rent.

Around 4 AM, he sat down in a bank parking lot to rest. A police car pulled up and the officer asked if Walter was all right. He said yes, and explained what he was doing.

The officer asked when he ate last, and Walter told him about the bologna and eggs. The policeman offered to drive him to breakfast.

Walter told him he'd just paid his rent and had no cash. The officer told him to get in the car. Breakfast was on him. They joined some other officers at a fast food restaurant and Walter ordered a chicken biscuit. They had to urge him to order a second one.

The officer then drove Walter a few more miles toward his job. He had to leave for a shift change but said he'd drop him at a church where he'd be safe. He told him he'd send another officer to check on him and maybe carry him the rest of the way.

Walter sat outside the church for a few minutes, but then he got worried he might not make the job on time. So at 5:30 AM, he started out again.

He was walking along a two-lane road when the second officer picked him up. He said he'd heard about Walter, and drove him the last four miles to the job.

They arrived at 6:30. The policeman walked up to the house where Walter was to report and explained to the homeowner what had happened. "He's a great kid," he told Jenny Lamey. "He's been walking all night to get to your house."

Jenny, who has three sons of her own, started crying. She offered Walter a bed to take a nap and some food. He replied, "No, I'd rather get started."

The other two movers from Bellhops arrived shortly, and the three of them moved the Lameys across town to their new house.

At the end of the day, one of Walter's new co-workers gave him a ride home.

The next day, the homeowner Jenny Lamey called Walter's supervisor, and told her what he had done. Walter's boss, the CEO of Bellhops, called Walter to thank him. He told the

young man he wanted to meet him in person to show his appreciation. Walter walked 20 minutes to the coffee shop the CEO suggested.

When they met, the CEO gave him his own car, a 2014 Ford Escape. He said it would be in better hands with Walter.

Meanwhile, Jenny Lamey had posted the story on Facebook, and it took off. Before realizing that the CEO was going to give Walter a car, she started a GoFundMe page for Walter's car repairs. She asked for \$2,000. It quickly raised \$66,000.

At that point, Walter said any additional funds raised could go to the Birmingham Education Foundation, which had helped him as a high school student. Another \$25,000 came in for that.

Now I could be wrong, but I would be very, very surprised to learn that Walter ever thought such a turn of events was possible, ever thought he might become an Internet sensation or receive a car or money. I think he set out to walk 20 miles for the reason he said he did: It was the way he was raised.

“Don't let nobody tell you can't do something,” he told *The Washington Post*. “It's up to us whether we can.”

I tell you the reason I love this story. It's because it's what every single person who goes into a helping profession lives for. The opportunity to help someone who accepts that help ... and does something with it.

We see things happen both ways here. People who accept help and get back on their feet. And people who don't.

Unfortunately, we see a lot of self-sabotage. So many people who have brought destruction and misery upon themselves, primarily through drug use or anger issues or refusing to take responsibility.

That's a hard thing for me to say. That's a hard message for me to preach.

But the hard truth is: some people have the motivation to accept help and move forward. Some do not.

That has been the hardest, most unexpected and most discouraging thing about ministering in this place. Wanting more for someone than he wants for himself. Failing to make someone believe in herself.

In today's Scripture passage from the gospel of John, we see Jesus questioning this very same thing -- motivation. And motive.

This passage comes right *after* the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus multiplied five loaves of bread and two fish, and fed the huge crowd that had come to hear him. If you'd like to read along, I'll be reading from **John 6: 24-27**.

<sup>24</sup>So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

<sup>25</sup> When they found him on the other side of the lake, they said to him, 'Rabbi, when did you come here?'

<sup>26</sup>Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. <sup>27</sup>Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.'

As I said, this is the day *after* the miraculous feeding. Jesus is accusing the crowd of seeking him not because they wanted to hear his message, but because they were hungry again.

**“...(Y)ou are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.”**

“Sign” is John’s word for miracle. The very word “sign” indicates that a miracle is performed not for its own sake, but to point to something bigger. A miracle is a sign of God’s inbreaking kingdom in Jesus.

So Jesus is telling the people they are not interested in the kingdom of God. They’re just hungry. They want food. They are missing the bigger picture, the more important thing.

**“I am the bread of life,”** he will say a few verses later. To get *that bread* is the important thing. Not the bread that will satisfy you for five hours.

Now I’m a big believer that you have to care for people’s physical needs before you can move on to the more abstract things. Jesus himself tells us that in other places. *Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the imprisoned.*

But the goal is not to remain hungry, naked, sick or imprisoned. The goal is to become fed, clothed, healthy, free. Then turn around and help somebody else.

I guess the reason it bothers our staff so much when someone doesn't try to reach goals or try to get better is because we've seen it done. We know it's possible.

One of my most admired people during my time at Triune is a woman named Vernelle Austin, whom you have heard lead our responsive readings many times.

I met Vernelle probably a dozen years ago. She's in her mid-60s, and she has worked ever since I've known her. She has taken in grandchildren. She has ridden the bus hours and hours to work and to doctors' appointments and to get things those children needed.

Our men helped move her into a house in West Greenville many years ago. Then last year, she came to us and said the landlord was selling and she had to leave.

I have a little fund that the John I. Smith Foundation gave us expressly for people who are trying to help themselves. I told her I knew how hard she'd been trying, and we'd be willing to help her get into another place.

And she said, "You know what would help me even more? A car."

She had already been saving for one, so we put some money with hers, and she bought a car from Miracle Hill. I threatened them that *we knew people* if that car ever gave trouble.

Meanwhile, Vernelle spent all winter and spring in Miracle Hill women's shelter, Shepherd's Gate. She left the car with her sister for awhile, because her sister was getting all

the grandchildren to school and back. And she saved her money and got into an apartment this summer.

Now she's in our Faith and Finance class on Monday nights, trying to improve her money management skills. Our director Cheri told me Vernelle would have to have a limb hanging off her body before she'd miss a class.

Following God, being disciples, helping others, takes many different forms. As I preach most of the time, I believe we have to dismantle systems of injustice, to level the playing fields, to create a society where all are welcome and valued and cherished.

But I have also come to believe that we help best when we encourage people to reach for their best.

Amen.