

Luke 7:1-10

Such Faith

When we read the stories-the tales we loved as children or our favorite novels, or even the stories in the Bible- we like to think of ourselves as the heroes, right? Like in this one, we want to be the person Jesus approves of, hearing him say, "I've never seen such faith!" But it occurred to me yesterday, waking up stuffy and unwell and so miserable, that I'm not the hero, but the sick servant. And there are many we know feeling just that same way; but maybe we're getting better- whether it takes a miracle or not, we'll just have to see. I can't help but think though, there is a lesson for us in realizing we are not the heroes but rather the ones who need help.

In this passage Jesus heals someone, an unimportant person- except to the important person who wants him healed. But the story isn't about the healing. Most miracle stories are told with another purpose- as is this one, to tell us something about Jesus or to relate some response to Jesus, and that response- in the affirmative- is what we call faith. And so, these stories were told and retold, and organized into gospels to bring the readers, as well, to an affirmative response to Jesus: to bring them to faith. The goal for us,

in line with our scripture, is to know Jesus in such a way that we come to possess a faith like the centurion.

So here is this foreigner, a member of the occupying force in Galilee, and yet well-liked and highly regarded within the community: asking for a miracle. But the miracle won't cause him to believe in Jesus- he believes already. He has heard about Jesus, and asks the leaders of the town to go to Jesus on his behalf. What did he hear? Very likely, some of the rumors and wild stories that were circulating about Jesus, but this is what I think Luke and Matthew- who also tells this story, want us to understand about the centurion's conception of Jesus: that this miracle account follows immediately after what is called Luke's Sermon on the Plain in chapter 6- with much of the same teaching as Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. You know how it goes: blessed are the poor, blessed are you that hunger, blessed are you that weep; love your enemies, give to anyone who begs from you; be merciful, do not judge. I think this is the teaching that turns the centurion to Jesus; it is this that brings him to faith.

But what are we to learn from this story? Consider this as one story in Luke's two-part epic saga of Jesus and the early church that proclaimed his

Good News; and how the author must be preparing his readers for the outward movement of the church and the story of Cornelius, later on in Acts 10: another Roman centurion and worshipper of God, an alms giver, who sent a messenger to Apostle Peter so that he might be taught about the Lord and come to believe in him. In this tale of Jesus and the centurion and his servant, we see the gospel of Jesus and God's healing going out to Gentiles and not limited to one particular group. And even the Jews of Capernaum know this is right: "He is worthy," they say.

But for us all come after Jesus' timeline, for the first readers of the gospel- and all of us who have come after, this story prepares us for a Messiah who is no longer present. How can we believe in him then, when we have never met him? Here is a hopeful word: the centurion had never met him, either. Even in the story, he and Jesus do not speak to one another, they do not meet face to face. And yet he believed. Really, this is remarkable story telling, we have the Jewish elders and friends speaking on the centurion's behalf, but the centurion himself never makes an appearance; and Jesus has only the one line at the end. But even so, they fill up the content and the context of the passage; so large are their personalities, that

everything revolves around them. The passage demands that we believe without seeing, that we see Jesus in some other manner: in the humble power of his teaching passed along through his followers, and in the kindness and compassion of their deeds done for the sake of others.

So, 1) the mysterious nature of faith, and 2) the expansion of the faith. But this is where the story drives it home: in Jesus pronouncement, “I tell you, I’ve never found such faith anywhere else.” Are you a little confused as to what makes the centurion’s faith so great? Everybody is. But there may be something that can help us to understand.

Jesus compares his faith to the faith of Israel, or better, to the faith of those who have come to Jesus asking for his help- what is it they said? “He loves our nation, he built the synagogue for us: he is worthy for you to do this for him.” But the fact is the centurion doesn’t need Jesus’ help; he is fine, healthy, already has everything. It is his slave that is ill. And all that the centurion does is focused on him- on this, what shall we call him- this insignificant, or unworthy person. But this is how the centurion truly proves his worth, that he values this other person, who in the eyes of most people is without value, someone expendable, replaceable. Don’t get caught up and

confused by the centurion's logic, of having people under him he can command, and officers of higher rank who can order him about; just know this about his speech out of the mouths of his friends, that when he speaks of the sick man, he doesn't call him slave or servant, or my property, he uses a different word in verse 7, a word that signifies caring and relationship. Yes, according to our text, the sick man was a slave, but he was also an intimate, a friend of his master. Out of the closeness of their relationship, or friendship if you wish to call it that, out of his concern for a man beneath him in society's measure of persons, he is yet equal to him in the way that we measure friendship, and equal in the value Jesus places on persons; despite their disparate situations in life, they are equals.

Thus, when Jesus comments that he hasn't seen such faith in Israel, perhaps he isn't thinking about the quantity of it, how strong and impressive and big it is- it even builds synagogues; he is referring to the quality of it. About how inclusive, and how selfless it is. Really, the centurion is just following the words and teachings of Jesus, from the writings on the previous page of the gospel: do good, and give- expecting nothing in return, and you will become children of the Most High God; be merciful, just as

your Father in heaven is merciful. The faith of the centurion causes him to seek a good result for someone else. And that is the meaning of true faith, it looks out for others, and it is displayed not by what we have received from God that we can show off, but displayed for all to see when we pray for others, and act kindly and give to them without holding back. In this is God's mercy perfected.

I believe the deepest meaning of this passage can be found in a statement by theologian and mystic, Thomas Merton: In the end it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything. There, I think, is the essence of faith, for faith necessarily establishes relationship- and a particular kind of relationship, humble and giving- with God and with other persons. And so, it is the essence of discipleship, as well, of the life lived before God that creates and maintains relationships- not just acquaintances but intimacy, and relationships of caring and helping and praying for. Relationships that recognize the importance of others to God. Relationships that are founded upon God's love for us, and for all God's children, and the understanding that- because of God's love- we are all equal, seldom heroes perhaps, but

rather equally sick and needy, and called to love one another and
commanded to be kind. When we understand that, then yes, our faith will
lead us to other persons, and our lives will become a blessing and a healing
to everyone around us.