

Inside Out

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

May 29, 2016

Ordinary 9

Luke 7:1-10



There's a man I see every year on Christmas Eve. He always introduces himself to me and shakes my hand. He's holding his candle by his side which was burning earlier in the service while we sang *Silent Night*. He always says the same thing. "Pastor, I look forward to this service every year, and it is always so beautiful. See you next year."

I asked him the first time this happened if he was visiting family from out of town. "No, I live in Brentwood."

I've asked him if he has a church home. "No, I just enjoy coming out for Christmas Eve. See you next year."

Some years it is hard for me to resist the impulse to suggest that perhaps his faith could use a bit more than *Silent Night* by candlelight. But every year I just smile and nod and acknowledge once again his presence, thinking to myself, "You couldn't even muster the energy to be a Christmas *and* Easter Christian like most of the others of your ilk." I write him off as being a man of little faith.

So imagine for a minute that Jesus stands up in front of our congregation on a regular Sunday, like say the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend, when all the people I would say have *great* faith are in attendance, and said to all of us, "You know that guy who comes only on Christmas Eve? I've not seen faith like that in this entire church."

You mean more than those who gave up a mimosa brunch and barbeque pit to sit in these pews and worship God?

You mean more than those who forgo the lake or the beach or the mountains this brilliantly sunny Lord's Day to teach a Sunday school class?

You mean more than the All Things Possible Planning Team that plans to meet after church today, on a holiday weekend, to conduct important business so that the project planning moves forward?

If Jesus said that we might just show him the door.

And yet, that is just what he says about, of all people, a Roman centurion.

The first-century Roman-Jewish historian Josephus describes the daily duties of Romans soldiers in this way:

"Nothing is done without a word of command. At daybreak the rank and file report themselves to their respective centurions, the centurions go to salute the tribunes, the tribunes with all the officers then wait on the commander-in-chief, and he gives them, according to custom, the watchword and other orders to be communicated to the lower ranks."

"Thus the training and religious oaths of the soldier and the centurion prepared him for a life of orders and obedience to orders, as had been sworn to the deities and powers."

The soldiers the centurion in our story leads in Capernaum have a very specific job – keeping Rome in power over the people. He is in command of the soldiers who actively control the Jewish population, whom many of the Jews would see as occupiers. He is, in other words, a Gentile, an outsider...most Jews would say an enemy.

However, Centurions were not afraid to access the coffers of Rome and use patronage to keep the locals beholden to them. The centurion in today's story built the synagogue in the city, perhaps initially as a way to keep the Jews there in a position of owing him.

You know how this works. It has been the way of politics for a long time. Last week Garrison Keillor of *A Prairie Home Companion* wrote an op-ed for the Richmond, Virginia *Times-Dispatch* regarding Virginia's former governor:

"Every time the former Governor talks about his corruption conviction in Virginia, he mentions how Jesus Christ is sticking with him all the way, which surely is true. Jesus does not dump a guy just because he is sleazy. The Lord has always been there for thieves and malefactors, but this is mercy; it doesn't mean that Jesus approves of taking more than \$150,000 in gifts from a man cozying up to a governor, as the Governor seems to suggest. Jesus didn't wear a Rolex. He did not hit up the Pharisees for thousands of shekels so the apostles could have rib-eye steak and a 35 B.C. cabernet at the Last Supper."

Exactly. To put it in the parlance of my daughter's generation, "That's not how Jesus rolls." He doesn't peddle in influence; he's not an "I'll scratch your back and you scratch mine" person. Which is why it is odd to see his reaction when a delegation of Jewish elders comes to him, pleading for him to heal the centurion's slave, because, to use their words, "He is worthy of you doing this, for he loves our people and built our synagogue."

This is what you would expect the elders to do. They are beholden to the centurion. After all, he did build their synagogue. He speaks the word and they do as they are told. Surely Jesus will see through this thinly-veiled effort at lobbying and refuse to play the game.

Instead, inexplicably, Jesus begins to follow the elders to the centurion's house.

They approach and are met by another group of emissaries from the centurion. These friends have a different word for Jesus. The centurion did not feel worthy to be in Jesus' presence in the street, which is why he sent the elders. He certainly does not feel worthy to have Jesus in his own home. The elders said he was worthy. He says, through these friends, he is not.

He has just one request of Jesus. "Only say the word."

"Only say the word." He knows about speaking and making something happen. He gives the order and his men act. He is given an order and he acts. He is a powerful man of authority. But now he has come to the limits of his authority. His soldiers cannot cure the sick. His shield cannot protect the one he cares about from death. His money cannot buy wholeness.

And yet he trusts that Jesus' authority is of a completely different order. Jesus can speak the word and healing comes out of brokenness, life comes out of death, freedom comes out of bondage. His word, the word of Jesus, is the authority not of the empire of Rome, but the kingdom of God.

Somehow this man who has never laid eyes on Jesus, who has only heard about him, believes that with only a word Jesus can heal his slave.

And that's when Jesus turns around and looks at those who are following him with amazement, which means he is also turning around and looking at *us* with amazement, and says, "I have not seen faith like this even in Israel." And he says not another word.

He doesn't say, "Be healed." He doesn't go to the centurion's house. But when his friends return, they find the slave well.

You know that beloved passage of scripture from John 3:16, "For God so loved the church, and people in the church who look like me, that he gave his only begotten Son..." You know that's not it, that's not it at all, and yet it is perhaps the hardest thing to absorb – "For God so loved *the world*." The world.

God loves the man who only comes to church on Christmas Eve. God loves the Roman centurion, and the centurion's slave. God loves my enemy. God loves the person who doesn't look like me or vote like me or believe like me or behave like me. God loves the people of Franklin, and Flint, and Fallujah.

Christ did not call the church into existence for its own sake, but for the sake of the world. We exist for the man who shows up on Christmas Eve. We exist for the people who curl up with the paper instead of a Bible at 11 a.m. on Sunday morning. We exist for those who are our enemies. We exist for those who do not think they are worthy to darken the door of this sanctuary. We exist for those who have done all they can do under their own steam and now are in situations where the only thing they know to do is ask, "Say the word."

One reader of this story suggests that the centurion "anticipates all believers yet to come who have not seen Jesus but who have believed his word as having the power of his presence."

That's us. That's the church. We are the centurion. We live in the world, the real world, with all its sin and brokenness, all its pettiness and corruption. And yet somewhere along the way, we realized that there is another world being born in the midst of this one, a world governed not by the power of the sword and the bank account, but by the word of this Christ, who comes to us out of God's great love for the world – the entire world.

How did we come to faith? We came to it by nothing but the grace of God, to be sure. But that grace operates through the means of hands and hearts and words of followers of Christ who dare to follow him in the world and for the world's sake. Through friends who are willing to bring us before the Lord in prayer, like the friends who sought out Jesus for the centurion. Through a church willing to meet us where we were and help form us as disciples of Jesus Christ. Through the mercy of a Christ who never gives up on thieves and malefactors, on sinners the likes of us, whose mercy is new every morning, who reminds us we are worthy because we are children of God.

I don't think Jesus was slamming the faith of Israel or the church in this text. But he was reminding us that faith is faith, that it comes from the surprising, boundary-breaking Spirit of God, and that this Spirit is not just at work in the church, but in the world, among the most unlikely of folks.

I'm going to remember this on Christmas Eve, when my once a year friend comes through the line. And what would our world look like if it was something we all remembered each day, in the church, in the marketplace, at our places of work, in the public square, in the halls of government. Just imagine if we all approached those we encounter through that perspective. These pews would not be able to hold all who would be drawn to worship the God we proclaim, the God who calls us worthy, the God who loves the world. Amen.