

“THE GIFT OF FAITH”

Luke 7:1-10

I read recently the story of a young American soldier in Iraq who jumped into a foxhole just the seat of his pants ahead of a bullet. Crouching and digging in a bit deeper, his hand touched metal, and he brought up a silver cross, left no doubt, by a former resident. A moment later, another leaping figure landed beside him as the shells screamed. When the soldier got a chance to look, he saw that his companion was an army chaplain. Holding out the cross, the soldier gasped, “Am I glad to see you! Hey, how do you work this thing?”

We may smile, but that is how some of us look at faith, isn't it? We often say to ourselves-how do I work this thing called faith, especially if I'm in a tough spot, like in a foxhole, or when a relationship is crumbling, or on the cancer wing of a hospital. Yet I think we can all recognize that the key to experiencing the gift of faith in our lives is not to just wait until I am in a desperate situation, but to reflect on how I can live my life with the gift of faith everyday. Thomas Aquinas, a great theologian from about 1000 years ago, once said, “To one who has faith, no explanation is necessary. To one without faith, no explanation is possible.” That is a reminder to us that some of us have an easier time with faith than others-have you ever noticed that, that some people just have an easier time believing than others? I mean, some of us here this morning are filled with faith-we have never trusted God more in our lives, while others of us here today feel like our faith is dead inside, which is hard for us because it used to be so strong. If that is where you are today, please don't be discouraged-our relationship with God often does go through ups and downs throughout our lives. Others of us are just starting to explore this whole realm of faith, wondering what it would mean for us to have a real relationship with God. So today I want to encourage you in your faith, wherever it stands, as we continue my sermon series on One Day in the life of Jesus, as drawn from the gospel of Luke.

So far over the past few weeks, we have seen how Jesus began this day in prayer, and then chose twelve of his followers to be his key disciples, and then He spent the rest of the morning teaching a large group of followers. He told them to love your enemies, and to build a strong foundation in your life by hearing and then acting on the Word of God. And when He had finished teaching that morning, Luke tells us that He left the place where he was teaching and went into the town of Capernaum, which lies at the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. Maybe Jesus was going to have lunch there. The passage we heard this morning tells us what happened to him next, and it is a story that is full of unusual twists and turns. There was a centurion there in Capernaum that wanted Jesus to heal a sick servant of his. He was a Roman military officer in charge of 100 men who was stationed in that area to keep the peace for the Roman Empire that ruled it, and the first surprising thing about this story is that this centurion would approach Jesus. After all, the centurion was a powerful man who had an important position in the mighty Roman army, and so he was subject to the pride that often comes with power. He could have easily despised Jesus as one of the conquered peoples that they looked down upon. He was also a Gentile, or non-Jew, so it was unusual that he would seek out a Jewish teacher for the healing of this servant, even someone as well known as Jesus.

But we are also told that he was a godly man—he had even built a synagogue for the local Jewish population. He obviously cared about this servant of his who was very sick, and most importantly for this story, he was a man of faith, who recognized within Jesus real power from God. So he asked a delegation of elders from the local synagogue, who had all benefited from his generosity, to ask Jesus to come heal his servant.

The next surprising thing in the story is that Jesus agreed to the request of these elders to go to the centurion's house, because many Jewish teachers of his time would not have done so, gone to a Gentile's house—that would make them unclean, but Jesus had been breaking barriers down like this throughout His ministry, so He began the walk to the centurion's house. But then the most amazing thing of all in this story happens while Jesus is on His way. He is walking along with these elders from the synagogue, with the crowd that always followed walking behind them, when a couple of people run up to Him. Breathlessly, they stop Jesus in His tracks and say "Teacher, Teacher, we have a message for you from our master the centurion. He says, 'Lord, don't trouble yourself any further, for I do not even deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go', and he goes, and that one 'Come', and he comes. I say to my servant 'Do this', and he does it.'"

What an amazing message for this centurion to send! He had such faith in Jesus that he didn't even think that Jesus needed to come to his house to heal his servant. He understood that just as people were under his authority, so he was under God's authority, and just as he had power to do things, so did Jesus. I would then guess that a big smile broke out over Jesus' face when he heard this message from the centurion. He nodded his head in amazement, and then turning around to face the crowd, He said to them "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." He must have then faced the messengers and told them to go home, for their centurion's servant would be healed, which he was. I'm sure that Jesus used the example of the faith of this centurion often in His sermons and messages to His followers about what real faith looks like.

Now I want you to notice something very important about this centurion—he had a solid foundation in place in his life. Last week we talked about how to build a solid foundation in your life, a foundation that will stand during the tough times that you will face. We said that first, you need to take time out in your life to hear God's words, and then secondly you need to act on those words, not just on Sunday mornings, but on Monday mornings and Wednesday afternoons and Friday nights too. You can see that the centurion was someone who took time out in his life to hear God's words. After all, he gave money for the building of the synagogue, which implies that he really valued the importance of the Bible and a place to hear it. One might guess that he had also taken time out of his busy schedule to listen to Jesus speak, because that is why he is now sending messengers to talk to Jesus about this important matter. He also was someone who acted on the words from God he heard. He gave away of his money for God's work, and he valued people greatly, as we can see in the way that he was seeking to take care of this servant. It is obvious that over the years, he had built a foundation of faith in his life, so because he had that solid foundation, when a tough time came, when someone close to him was dying, he was able then to take a step of faith in his life and go to Jesus. Now I am sure that he would have accepted it if

Jesus had said that I cannot help you-your servant will die. He would have understood that none of us live forever. But once Jesus said that He would heal his servant, the centurion trusted in that promise made to him. He knew that Jesus did not even need to come to his home-His word was enough. His faith was strong, and it ended up being an example for all of us.

Now let's be honest- before we build a solid foundation of faith in our lives, you and I tend to be seeing is believing kind of people. I mean, we may think that it is all well and good to believe that God exists and perhaps even to come to church, but deep down inside, we don't really trust that God is going to be at work in whatever situations we face. We may be dealing with a painful family situation, struggling with a habitual sin, dealing with an illness or out of work. And we think to ourselves that if God really cared about me, all these situations would be instantly fixed, but since they are not, I am just going to assume that God doesn't really care and that I am on my own and act accordingly because seeing is believing.

But the stronger we build a foundation of faith in our life, the longer we both hear the word of God and act on it, the more we become believing is seeing kind of people. We begin to understand that not all the situations that are painful to us in our lives are going to be remedied over night when we pray about them. Sometimes in a broken world, bad things do happen, and sometimes God even allows bad things to happen in our lives so that we can learn something very important about putting more trust in Him and not in the things around us. So we know that not everyone we pray for that is sick is going to get well, and we have all learned that God does not answer all of our prayers in the way we ask them, in the time frame that we want, no matter how much faith that we may have. But part of the gift of faith is recognizing that we can trust God even when things are not going our way, that we can trust that God is with us, that we are not alone, and that God is there to give us wisdom about how to deal with our situations when we pray. So believing is seeing people are like the centurion. They bring things before Jesus constantly. They trust God to be in control of the situation that they are facing, even though it may seem at the moment uncontrollable. Their attitude of faith and trust not only changes their life, but the lives of those around them.

When I think of believing is seeing kind of people, I'm reminded of a story that comes from London during World War II, when German planes night after night would pound London with their bombs. The people of the city upon hearing the air raid sirens would leave their homes and apartments and go to underground shelters. On one particularly bad night, a father and his little girl left their flat to go to the shelter, but as the father went down the ladder into the landing below and was almost there, the ladder suddenly broke. The father stood in darkness at the foot of what used to be the ladder, and his child stood uncertain on the ground above, unable to see him. But she could hear his voice. "Jump!" he said. "Daddy can see you. Now, right into my arms!" She was scared and frightened, but she knew from experience that she had faith in her father, so even though she couldn't see him, she jumped and landed safely in his arms. Her example inspired those around her to know that they too would be safe.

Is Jesus asking you to jump right now? Are you a seeing is believing person, or a believing is seeing one? Let us remember the important spiritual truth that what we see is real, but it is not the ultimate

reality. Behind what we see is a good God who has promised to reconcile all things to God's self. We trust Him for that, Praise be to God, Amen.