

Cross-Town Faith
January 24, 2021

Some years back, my wife and I bought a firepit. It has a stainless steel bowl, with a base to support it. For a lid, it came with a domed, screen mesh top. But such a top is no good for keeping sparks from rising up out of the pit. It is no good for cutting off the oxygen so the fire will go out.

Then I had an idea. If I could find an old kettle style charcoal grill, which usually had a solid, domed lid, I could use that top as a cover for my fire pit. I could cover the pit so the coals would go out safely.

So whenever I drove around on errands, meetings, or visiting people in the hospital, I would keep my eyes open for someone throwing out such a grill along the side of the road. I realize it was a long shot, but I asked the Lord to provide one.

Well one day, some months later, I needed to visit someone at Southern Maryland Hospital way down in Prince Georges County. I was driving on Surratts Road to get to the hospital. As I drove I spied a house being built with a long dumpster in the driveway, and on top of the heap of trash in the dumpster I saw what appeared to be a kettle grill. I did not stop, but made a mental note to stop when I came back from the hospital.

Sure enough, on top of the dumpster heap was exactly what I had been on the lookout for. The lid was dented, but did not have any holes or rust. I brought it home and have used it ever since.

Has there been a time when you were on the lookout for something? Maybe it was a certain style of house. Maybe you were on the lookout for a particular used vehicle for sale. Maybe you keep an eye out on gas prices, so you always know where to buy at the best price. Maybe you once saw an unfamiliar flower and you have been hoping to see one and find out its name.

Well, when Jesus started his teaching ministry, he was on the lookout for something. As he encountered people, he was on the lookout for something he hoped to find.

Jesus was looking for faith-filled people. We learn this in Matthew's gospel, chapter 8.

Matthew 8:5-10 (NIV) When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering."

Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him."

The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just 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."

When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.

Jesus was on the lookout for faith. This was not a side issue with him. His number one objective was to find faith among the Jewish people.

This had been John's objective also. John the Baptist had been Jesus' front man. John was looking for Jews with faith and a willingness to repent of their sins. John called God's people of faith to believe the promises about the kingdom, and show it in his baptism.

In Jesus' search for faith-filled people, he too preached repentance. We see this in Matthew 4.

Matthew 4:17 (NIV) From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

Now there wasn't much to do in those days for entertainment. So, when news came to town about some wild man on the edge of the wilderness lots of people went out to see him out of curiosity. Upon hearing John preach many were not interested in repenting of their sins. They just wanted to see a show.

Jesus too, had crowds for much the same reason. People were amazed at his miracles. But most were not much interested in trying to figure out what he was teaching about. In fact, Jesus made it harder to understand. To these crowds, Jesus taught mostly in parables. He used parables to separate people of faith from the curious onlookers wanting to be entertained.

Jesus was on the lookout for those Jews who really trusted in God and were seeking, praying, hoping for the arrival of the kingdom of God. They were glad to be baptized, publicly announcing their desire for the kingdom.

Now, Matthew, the writer of this Jesus biography wrote to make the point that Jesus was looking for faith among God's people. He wanted his readers to put their faith in Jesus. He wrote to show that Jesus was full of the power and authority of God. Matthew showed this about Jesus in the stories he picked for his biography.

Think about this. Jesus' teaching ministry lasted over two years. Most every day he was teaching, healing, or traveling. So there were lots and lots of stories of what Jesus did and said that Matthew could have included. He probably had enough memories to write a book ten times the size of the one he wrote. But he narrowed down the list of stories to the few he recorded for us. And chose particular stories and put them in a particular order to make a point.

And here is the point of this section of his gospel.

Matthew wrote so that you would believe that the authority of God resided in Jesus.

We can see his point when we look at the bigger picture of this section of his gospel. When many people read the Bible they simply read stories. They read this story. Then tomorrow or next week they read the next story. And they fail to see how they are all connected. They fail to see the overall purpose of the author. Only by looking at how the stories are arranged can you see Matthew's purpose.

Let me illustrate. When driving down Interstate 85 to my wife's hometown, we pass many pine forests. Some are natural forests, the trees coming up haphazardly by seeds scattered by gravity and the wind. But some of the forests look different. If you look at them from just the right angle, you can see that the trees are arranged in rows. These forests were intentionally planted by someone. There was a purpose in their planting. You can tell by the fact that the trees are arranged in rows.

Look at the arrangement of this part of Matthew's gospel:

- In 8:1-4, we read that Jesus can heal lepers, the most dreaded affliction of that day.
- In 8:14-17, we read that Jesus can command demons and heal illnesses.
- In 8:23-27, we read that Jesus can control the winds and waves.
- In 8:28-34, we learn that Jesus healed two Gentiles of a group of very powerful demons.
- In 9:1-8, we read that Jesus can heal the paralyzed.
- In 9:18-25, we read that Jesus can raise the recently deceased.
- In 9:27-31, we learn that Jesus can heal birth defects like muteness and blindness.

These stories are the kind of evidence upon which the centurion came to his conclusion about Jesus. He saw or heard what Jesus was doing and came to the conclusion that the power and authority of God resided in Jesus. Jesus himself affirms the same as recorded by Matthew at the end of his gospel.

Matthew 28:18 (NIV) Then Jesus came to them (the eleven apostles) and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

We say the same thing every time we say that Jesus is Lord. It is this Jesus we are called to put our faith in.

This is the faith Jesus is looking for from us today. This is the faith that almost none of the Jews had. Yet, this is the faith that one heathen roman soldier had. Let's go back and finish our passage.

Matthew 8:5-13 (NIV) When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering."

Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him."

The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just 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."

When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west (non-Jews), and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom (Jews who rejected Jesus) will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (sorrow and regret)

Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that very hour.

This Roman soldier had great faith. Other people asked Jesus to come to their homes and heal someone. They believed Jesus might be able to heal, but only close up. Maybe he would use magic or a potion or some medicine. They believed Jesus needed to be present, to see and hear and touch the person.

This roman soldier believed much more of Jesus than this. He believed that the power and authority of God resided in Jesus. Thus, he concluded that Jesus could heal from anywhere to anywhere. He told Jesus to heal without being in his home. He had cross-town faith.

Not from any Jewish person had Jesus encountered such great faith. He is so impressed that he comments about this to his followers. I wonder what they thought and felt at those words. I wonder if they heard this as a rebuke of their faith. I wonder if they felt embarrassed, even some shame, at hearing those words.

Well, Jesus still has all the authority of God. Jesus is still Lord of all the earth. Jesus is still building his kingdom. And though he is physically in heaven, he is present in us by the Holy Spirit. We must put our faith in Jesus. We must both believe in him and trust him.

We must trust him for life.

We must trust him for health.

We must trust him for direction.

We must trust him for wisdom.

We must trust him for understanding of spiritual things.

We must trust him in everything.

The faith required for God to forgive your sins is a faith of believing and trusting. You must believe all that the Bible says about Jesus. You must believe all that Jesus says. You must believe all that his apostles wrote. And you must entrust your life to him as Lord.

Today, won't you put your faith in Jesus?