

Sermon on Luke 7:1-10, Galatians 1:1-12
2nd Sunday after Pentecost, May 29, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

So what is going on with this gospel lesson, which is so much more than your average “healing story” by Jesus? Let’s take a closer look. After teaching a “sermon on the plain” according to Luke, Jesus returned to Capernaum, a small city by the Sea of Galilee. There was in that city a Roman officer – a centurion (in charge of up to 100 soldiers) who had a slave – whom he valued highly – who was very ill. The centurion had heard about Jesus and his powers to heal, so he sent some Jewish elders to Jesus to ask him to come and heal his slave. The elders went to Jesus and said that this Roman officer was “worthy” of Jesus’ help (he was a “good Roman”, unlike most of the other Roman occupiers, who lorded it over the people). But as Jesus approached his home, the centurion sent out friends to tell Jesus he wasn’t “worthy” of having Jesus enter his house – so just speak the word, and let his slave be healed. For the centurion was a man who understood authority – and power – and if Jesus gave the order, he trusted that it would be done. Jesus was amazed at the centurion’s trust in him – having never met him – so he told the crowd around him, “Not even in Israel have I found such faith!” And when the centurion’s friends arrived back to the house, they discovered that indeed, the slave was in good health. Who was this, who healed just by saying the word?

Key to this story is that the centurion was a Roman, not a Jew. He was a foreigner, a soldier from a conquering army, an authority in the army of occupiers. There would have been no love lost for this centurion. The people following Jesus would have surely been suspicious of a Roman like him. But not only that – think of how Luke’s audience would have heard this. Luke wrote his gospel ten years AFTER the Roman’s had torn down and destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD, brutally squashing their rebellion, and sending the people into exile. So, to hear Jesus *praising* a Roman officer’s faith, who represented the army which had destroyed the Jewish homeland, would have been unimaginable. Except - this is what Jesus had said. It meant that Jesus could see the faith in any person, of any ethnicity, any language, no matter how much of an “outsider” others considered them. So a key learning from this story is *how God can see faith in any human being*, no matter how unimaginable it might be to you and me. It makes me wonder who Jesus might lift up as an example of faith and model citizenship at a Republican political rally, or a Democratic party convention. We all might be surprised!

The point that an outsider or a foreigner can be an example of faith for us is certainly a challenge. But there is also another challenge for us: the point that this Roman found it no trouble at all to understand the *authority* Jesus had to heal with

only a word. For Jesus' words have power and authority, far beyond our experience of anyone else's words. Because people around us can say so much without little to back it up, we have less confidence in the power of words. We even have sayings and phrases that exemplify this: such as, *those are just empty words, don't say it unless you mean it, you talk big – can you back it up?*

We don't usually have faith in a person's words, unless they have proven that they can be trusted – according to what they have said and done in the past. Are you and I good for our words? If I make a promise, can you trust me to carry it out? Not unless you know me, and have witnessed my words being consistent with my actions. This is why being trustworthy in small things is so important. If I as a parent promise my child that I will come in time to watch his or her game, I had better be there. If I say "this is what will happen if you do this", it had better happen. Otherwise, our words won't be trusted in the big things, and that's when terrible things can happen, which can break relationships. When you tell someone you will show up, or you will call, you had better show up, and you had better call. If not, you will never be counted on for the big stuff. And if you are trustworthy in the small things, you will be trusted to do the important things.

As we look at Jesus' example in the gospels, and from the disciples, we can see that Jesus was trustworthy for the small things he said he would do. So when he prayed, powerful things happened. When he laid hands on someone, or said their sins were forgiven, well, they were healed, their blindness was turned to sight, and lame people walked. Sinners who had been condemned by their peers, were forgiven by Jesus and walked free. Jesus' friend Lazarus was dead, but when Jesus prayed, he told Lazarus to "come out", and Lazarus came out of his grave, very much alive! Jesus' words had power from God – he meant them, and people believed in him. Jesus knew he would die, but he said he would rise again. Jesus died on a cross, he was buried, and on the third day arose. Jesus ascended into heaven, but said that he will come again. So what do you think will happen? Whose word do you trust? One who speaks his words with *authority*, with conviction and compassion, and who acts according to his word – like Jesus! And sometimes it takes someone like that Roman officer, someone so unlike us that we can't imagine them having something to teach us, to give us the insight we need to understand that *Jesus' words have authority and power in and of themselves!*

In this world today we are divided in a lot of ways – between political parties, ideologies, values and religious beliefs. We know that words have power to divide and destroy. So what can we learn from this story, and from someone like this Roman centurion, who is so much different from us – from a different era and culture? The first, most obvious thing is that Jesus recognized the centurion's faith in his ability to heal his slave, as well as his ability to recognize the authority Jesus' words had (without even having met each other!). But just as important,

Jesus did not ask the Roman to *prove* his worthiness, or to *convert* to Judaism, or *follow Jesus* as a disciple. He let the Roman remain a Roman, and an officer, whatever his religious beliefs might be. It was only because the man valued the life of a slave that Jesus came in the first place; and it was his faith in Jesus' power to heal that amazed Jesus, resulting in the healing of his slave from afar.

Could you and I find it in ourselves to hold such faith in Jesus words and in his power? Remember, we are the generation that often questions the power of God, and even the presence and existence of Christ in the world! Do we recognize the power and presence of God in Christ Jesus today? Do we recognize faith in the people whom we don't understand or know, when they aren't Christian or from our own particular ethnic group, or speak a different language? Do we realize that God created every living thing, God loves every person, and God works in every human being to do God's will. So God heals, God nurtures, God inspires, God shows compassion, God loves, and God does amazing things through any and every human being! Even you and me!

So when we look at one another through God's eyes – as Jesus did - we can see the love of God that lives in every one. We are amazed at the faithfulness, kindness and compassion that we can see in another, whether they are Protestant, Roman Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, atheist or seeking – because the loving spirit of God can live and work in every human being. Evil and hatred can also exist in any human being, whether a believer or not, Christian as well as any other, because of our sin and unwillingness to see one another through the eyes of God.

On this Memorial Day we see the consequences and the cost to the hatred and evil that exist in our world, and have from the beginning. The lives that have been lost in war; the sacrifice of parents, relatives, friends and loved ones who have died in the armed forces. Many of them have been lost senselessly, or have died sacrificing themselves for others, in order to save others lives. WE remember them, and thank God for their sacrifice. But we also remember, as our President visited Hiroshima, Japan, the horrible, tragic cost to war, and the terrible result that our unwillingness to see one another with God's eyes of love can bring.

So we pray that we can have the compassion that the Roman centurion had for his slave, who was willing to go out of his way to find the one with the power to heal. We pray that God will give us the faith that allows us to believe in the power of Jesus, and that we will follow our Lord in crossing those walls of hatred and fear that divide us. This has been a difficult year, with evil things being said about others for political gain, with old prejudices and new fears being played upon to pit us against each other. Guide us with faith to believe in the one who commands us to "love one another, as I have loved you." Perhaps then others might be amazed by the compassion and love that we have for others, when we follow Jesus on the way that leads us all to life. Thanks be to God. Amen.