

## “Faith Where You Least Expect It”

Pentecost 2, Luke 7:1-10

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### **I. THE WHO AND WHAT?**

If I had asked you today at the start of worship, what the Story of Jesus and the Centurion was about, what would you have said? Did you know this story already? Might you might have thought, well...uh, I'm not quite, sure; I've heard of the guy! But, what was the deal? Jesus healed him or something?

This story has been in our “underground psyche for a long time, actually. You might have heard this verse from the scripture a time or two—if you ever went to Catholic Mass: “*Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.*” The faithful have said this for decades in worship, right before the elements are given.

Here's a little interesting tidbit for you: in 2011, after these words from Luke 7 had been said during that part of the Eucharist since God walked the earth, the words were changed to, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my *roof*, but only say the word and my *soul* shall be healed.”

I'm sure there was no end of debate behind the change—but basically, they wanted to capture the true sense of this encounter between\_\_\_\_you got it! Jesus and The illustrious Centurion.

### **II. WHAT WE DON'T KNOW**

Well, if you don't quite remember the ins and outs of this story (or, if you didn't until it was *read* a few minutes ago, and now you've got it all down pat), you're not alone. And, the truth of the matter is, even the many folks who have studied and parsed it and looked for the purpose behind it all have concluded:

There is an *awful* lot we don't know about this Story!! David Lose and others who study the scripture in depth, line out just a *few* things we don't know:

\*We don't know how this Roman centurion heard about Jesus.

\*We don't know anything about his military career, what wars he had perhaps waged, what battles fought.

\*We don't know why he changed his mind after first asking Jesus to come to him and then sending servants telling Jesus he didn't need to come but only to speak the word of healing.

\*We don't know why he cared so deeply about this slave.

\*We don't know if the slave was Jewish and that perhaps played upon the sympathy of the Jewish elders or Jesus.

\*We don't know what happened to either the slave or centurion after this encounter with Jesus.

Yes, there is so much we don't know.

Or, why—maybe more important than all that “life and times” stuff, was Jesus amazed? Because of the depth of the centurion's *faith*? Because it was a *Roman centurion* who had such faith?

We also don't know how the story would have been received by Luke's audience, several decades after Jesus' encounter. A Faithful Centurion?! That's like a *Good Samaritan*. It's an oxymoron!

### **III. WHAT WE DO KNOW**

It's time to take a look at what we *do* know.

We might back up a bit, and ask that million-dollar question: What the heck is a *Centurion*, anyway?

We've seen plenty of artwork (hint: look on your bulletin) and Instagrams from back in the day that show these guys wore really cool outfits. From the hat down to the slipper boots. Scholars tell us: *The centurion was the backbone of the*

*Roman army. Each legion was made up of sixty centuries, (aha!) each commanded by a centurion. He was a veteran soldier and had a position of prestige—he was paid about fifteen times as much as an ordinary soldier—as well as having authority.*

*His cuirass (chest armor of tough molded leather), transverse-plumed helmet, and wooden baton identify him as a centurion.*

*As an officer representing Rome, the centurion would often broker imperial resources for the local population. In this case, he has done so by building a synagogue and thus is recognized as a patron by the village elders. So, we know now what a centurion is.*

David Ewert points out we also know this: “this Roman centurion had *heard* about Jesus and believed he was capable of healing this beloved servant. And when Jesus sees the demonstration of faith, he not only heals the servant but is amazed!

And, we do know that when Jesus encounters someone so utterly different from him yet displaying faith, he does not ask him to convert or change or follow, he simply heals and sends into life renewed.

We do know that Jesus does not ask him to become his **follower**, or to take up his cross, or to deny himself, or to keep silent, or to share the good news, or *any* of the other things Jesus often does in similar situations.

We also learn here that Jesus has power to heal from a distance. He’s not just another Holy Man Healer. Those were a dime a dozen around there!

Finally, we see that Jesus doesn’t touch him. The slave or the Centurion!

#### **IV. WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW**

##### **A. Interruption + Surprise = Good News!**

So there’s what we do know and what we don’t know. Now, what do we *need* to know?

For starters, we need to realize that surprise can be a good thing! Interruptions; things happening out of the blue, unexpected company, requests for help at awkward times: all might turn into a moment of grace. Of finding faith in the least expected places, and from the most unlikely sources. And this might just make your day! It sure seemed to for Jesus.

We need to know that “being right there in the midst” is not always necessary to have an impact. Sometimes we think we can’t do anything or have any effect from a distance. But Jesus wasn’t in physical proximity, and still changed a life. Or several lives. Because he responded.

He didn’t let the barriers get in the way: of **space** and distance; of **space** of race and politics; or wonder if there was **space** in his agenda to work in one more healing that day. The guy didn’t have an appointment, after all!

##### **B. Loving our neighbor might mean enemy**

We need to know that Jesus had to have faith too! This guy was The Man. The Enemy. The Rep for the Oppressor! Sometimes the surprise interruption—where we’re called to reach out with healing is “behind enemy lines. Jesus had to trust, like us, that God would be with him, and was calling him to serve in unexpected places with unexpected people.

We need to remember that in the Bible, “faith” implies a relationship of trust and loyalty and not merely correct ideas about Jesus, or God, or anyone. Our “correct ideas” might get shaken up at times. Or all the time!

And, that “miracles” in the Bible are primarily about restoring right relationships.

The centurion's actions place him –and therefore his entire household—suspected enemies—in right relationship with Jesus, and that is a miracle for them, as it is for us when we reconcile, return, set right our relationships. With anyone—no matter which side of the line!

### **C. Jesus Doesn't Question Motive**

We need to realize that Jesus doesn't question what's behind the request—some kind of motive or agenda. We *don't* really know the motives of this Soldier and slave owner. Did he truly love this slave, or did he just need his “Help” back on the job?

Was he afraid his prime asset was about to be lost, and had heard this guy was in town who had a reputation for healing and other miracles. Was he desperately searching for help for a friend, or trying to efficiently expedite a staffing problem that had arisen?

It doesn't seem to matter to Jesus! Did he wonder about *any* of this? Was the guy deserving of his help? Was the slave? Had he taken appropriate steps to try to help himself first? Or, did he just hit-up Jesus the minute he came to town?

### **VI. HOW WE NEED TO RESPOND**

So, that's what we don't know, what we do know, what we need to know, so we can now wonder how we might (and should!) respond. To this blip in Jesus' ministry. This unusual healing comes out of an interruption, and really out of left field!

David Ewert wonders aloud: “I wonder how many other people who are not followers of Jesus God is using right now? I wonder how many people of other faiths *we* might be amazed about if we stopped to notice the good they are doing? I wonder how many people of different faith or no faith we might see differently – as God's beloved children – if we kept this story in mind?

Here's the thing: God loves everyone. God works through everyone. God has hopes and dreams for everyone. And we may be surprised who God chooses, who God works through, and who God commends.”

David Lose points out that “today, more than ever, we need this story—this definitive example of Jesus reaching across boundaries, walls, social order, in order to heal, restore and reconcile.”

He says: “I think that may be helpful to keep in mind, when the political rhetoric of the day is so charged with fear of those who are different – from a different country, professing a different faith, living in a different neighborhood, looking different from us, having different needs or hopes. To God, there is no “other,” there are only beloved children.”

*“Whenever we draw a line between who's in and who's out, we'll find Jesus on the other side.”*

“And could we pray this prayer today?” Lose challenges us, “Could we pray that we might be less surprised that God uses people we have decided are unexpected or unlikely to do wonderful things? Could we pray that God would open our hearts and eyes to see that God's love, will, and work extends far beyond the confines of our church or faith and that the God who showed up in the man crucified on a cross regularly shows up where we don't expect God to be and never, *ever* stops delighting in surprising us? Could we pray that, too?

One final challenge of response, on this Memorial Day is to particularly remember our veterans and those still serving.

Mihee Kim-Kort urges us to take this to heart today in a particular way:

“Luke's story instructs us of the need for the humanizing of people who are often stripped of their fragility and vulnerability because they are viewed as machines of the state. Luke's story of this centurion remind us that vets are like anyone else. They have

families. They have loved ones. They have households. They have livelihoods. They have moral struggles and anxiety, and they have regrets and questions.

Vets are as susceptible to death as all of us. Jesus' response of healing care can encourage and lead us to care for our military personnel at various levels, especially as the church. It is imperative that we provide for their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual care as they sacrifice a great deal to serve their countries.

#### **VI. WHERE YOU LEAST EXPECT IT!**

There's an old commercial jingle: "When you least expect it, you're elected!"

Jesus got elected that day and showed us the way. Called behind enemy lines. With no chance to touch, no spittle on the eyes, no casting out of demons. None of his usual tools, but, a long-distance "reach out and touch" kind of miracle that led to righting of relationships, across lines that divide.

And then, Jesus, the Healer, the main character ends up being the one who is amazed! Amazed at the faith that comes out of the most unexpected places, expressed by the least likely of characters in an unexpected encounter.

***God regularly shows up where we don't expect God to be and never, ever stops delighting in surprising us.***

"Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed."

"Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed."

May it be so with us, Amen.