

## A Soldier's Faith

Luke 7:1-10

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First  
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on May 29, 2016]

### I

If the old saying is true that a person is known by the company she keeps,  
then Jesus must have had a terrible reputation.

He spent time with all the wrong kinds of people.

He ate with the grungy and the despised of the world.

He associated with some of the lowest elements of humankind.

Jesus was always reaching out—  
to the poor,  
to the broken,  
to the marginalized.

In this expansive vision of love and acceptance,  
the Gospel reaches full flower.

### II

And yet, while Jesus often spent time with folks you or I wouldn't be caught dead  
with,

there were times when he found himself among the powerful.

When he was 12 years old, he wowed the scribes and rabbis in the Temple in  
Jerusalem.

There were times when he associated with persons of means and influence.

He even drew near to the purported enemies of Israel  
and dared to praise them.

Here too the gospel reaches full flower.

In either case, faith shows up in unexpected ways.

In Luke 7, Jesus is approached by a centurion seeking his help.

This particular centurion had a slave whom he loved who was seriously ill.

The centurion has heard about Jesus.

He believes that somehow, someday, this Galilean subject of Rome,  
     this lowly carpenter,  
         this itinerant preacher,  
             might be able to do the impossible:  
                 Jesus might just be able to heal the sick  
                     and stave off the forces of death.

Oddly, the centurion and Jesus never meet face-to-face.

All of their interactions occur through intermediaries.

First, it is the local Jewish leaders who ask for Jesus' help.

The centurion, they say, "is worthy of having you do this for him" (7:4).

They cite all his good qualities—  
     he loves our people...  
         he helped fund our synagogue.

Hearing all this, Jesus sets out...apparently without hesitation.

Now, no one would have blamed him for having some suspicions.

After all, entering the house of a Gentile could make Jesus ritually unclean and alienate him from his fellow Jews.

Even more, a centurion is not your typical friendly next door neighbor.

Centurions were the backbone of the Roman army—  
     like master sergeants in the U.S. Army.

They were in command of about 100 troops—  
hence the name, “centurion.”

Roman historian Polybuis describes their qualifications as,

“...men who can command, steady in action, and reliable; they ought not to be over anxious to rush into the fight; but when hard pressed, they must be ready to hold their ground and die at their posts.”

Vegetius, a 5<sup>th</sup> century historian, described the qualities of centurions this way:

“A centurion is chosen for great strength and tall stature, as a man who hurls spears and javelins skillfully and strongly, has expert knowledge how to fight with the sword and rotate the shield, and has learned the whole art of armature. He is alert, sober, and agile, and more ready to do things ordered of him than speak, keeps his soldiers in training, makes them practice their arms, and sees that they are well clothed and shod, and that their arms are burnished and bright.”

Centurions were the sharp edge of Rome's power—  
the tip of the spear, we might say.

They were the cruel face of an empire that had dominated and oppressed the people of Israel for nearly 100 years.

Later, this very same empire will order the execution of Jesus.

This same empire will destroy the Holy City of Jerusalem and raise the Temple to the ground.

Jesus has a number of reasons to resist helping this centurion even when he is recommended by the local Jewish leaders.

From the perspective of many of Jesus' neighbors,  
this centurion represents everything that is wrong about the world.

### III

And yet, Jesus accompanies them.

He is willing to see this centurion,

even to enter his house, it would appear.

We don't learn why Jesus is so eager to help this Roman soldier.

We only learn that Jesus,  
 made aware of the need of another human being,  
 does not hesitate in the slightest to head toward his house.

But on his way, another set of intermediaries enters the scene.

The centurion sends friends to stop Jesus from coming to his house.

Even though his Jewish friends consider him worthy of Jesus' help,  
 he recognizes that he is unworthy to host Jesus.

This is a rather extraordinary display of humility and submission for a Roman military leader accustomed to having his orders followed, not questioned.

Humility and power usually don't mix well, as we know.

A quick glance at our current political campaign is proof positive of this.

Most people endowed with power are not used to taking on postures of humility.

### **Jesus is amazed by this centurion's faith!**

Twice in Jesus' ministry, we find him dumbfounded, flabbergasted.

The first time is in Mark 6:6, after Jesus is rejected in Nazareth, his own hometown, he is dumbfounded—stunned—at their unbelief!

The second time is in today's story, as Jesus is again astonished,  
 but this time it is just the opposite.

This time he is flabbergasted at the Roman centurion's amazing faith.

Jesus turns to the crowd following him and says,  
*"I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith!"* (v. 9).

This is shocking.

Why would Jesus praise a foreigner, a Gentile, a Roman soldier so highly?

Imagine for a moment if Jesus were to walk into our congregation and declare our enemies more faithful than us.

Imagine for a moment if Jesus declared a terrorist more faithful than us,  
or a criminal more faithful than us.

This is how shocking Jesus' declaration was.

But if we've been paying attention to the Gospel of Luke,  
we should not be surprised.

The foreigner and the stranger and our worst enemy are just as welcome at  
God's table as anyone else.

After all, in Luke 2 it was mere shepherds,  
not the kings of the world,  
who welcomed Jesus at his birth.

In Luke 3, when corrupt tax collectors ask John the Baptist what they should do,  
how they should repent,  
John does not tell them to stop being tax collectors.

He tells them to stop taking advantage of their neighbors.

When Roman soldiers come to John and ask him the same question,  
he tells them not to lay down their swords  
but to execute their duties with honor.

In Luke 4, when Jesus preaches his first sermon,  
he points out that God sent the prophet Elijah beyond the boundaries of  
Israel to the aid of the widow of Zarephath,  
despite that fact that there were many hungry widows at home who  
could have used the prophet's help.

He also reminds us that it was a foreign general named Naaman who is cleansed of  
leprosy by Elisha.

This has happened before!

God will not be restrained by the boundaries we draw around one another.

God will constantly surprise us and may even enrage us when God offers grace to those we deem unworthy of such a gift.

#### IV

What then was the content of the soldier's faith?

What did the centurion believe?

What faith did Jesus see in him?

The centurion believed and recognized Jesus' power over the forces of death.

As a military officer, he likely understood well how powerful raw force could be.

He knows how masses of trained men armed with spears and swords can create massive destruction in their wake.

In the Ridley Scott movie "Gladiator" Maximus says,  
*"On my command, unleash hell."*

Centurions were experts at unleashing hell.

The centurion recognizes such power in Jesus,  
 but there is a difference in Jesus' power—  
 a difference the centurion believes can make all the difference in the  
 world.

Military might cannot heal the sick or raise the dead.

The finest army on earth can't heal his faithful servant.

Imperial power cannot gain the affections of a people,  
 but only their fear.

Jesus' power is unlike that wielded by Rome or any other empire.

Jesus' power heals peoples and communities;  
 it brings the powerful down from their thrones  
 and lifts up the lowly.

That is, Jesus' power turns the world upside down and inside out.

That a centurion would recognize this power is the very essence of faith.

For faith is seeing the world with God's eyes,  
 seeing the possibilities of a world renewed by God's love and grace.

## V

But that isn't the end of the story.

This story isn't just about a centurion and his slave.

This is not just about power alone for Luke;  
 it's also about the strength that abides in weakness.

This isn't the only case of exemplary faith Luke gives us in this chapter.

In fact, right after this story comes a second.

Let's turn there, to Luke 7:11-15, which reads:

*"Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gates of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, 'Do not weep.' Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise!' The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother."*

In this second story, Jesus sees a widow accompanying her son's body to the grave.

His death is her death in an economic system where men generally carried all financial power.

Jesus sees her from a distance and has compassion for her.

She never speaks to Jesus.

She never asks for his help.

She never confesses,  
like the centurion,  
great belief in the power Jesus wields.

Instead, Luke notes that Jesus has compassion on her and gives her son back to her.

And that's it.

At first glance, there's not much there,  
but if we look more carefully and read these two stories together,  
something marvelous becomes clear.

In these two stories, two very different people seek Jesus' healing touch in two very different ways.

What binds these two stories together is that God's promise of life is fulfilled and salvation arrives wherever Jesus walks.

Simply, we can't understand the powerful centurion if we don't also have in mind the grief-stricken widow.

On one side, you have a powerful centurion,  
beloved by the local Jewish community,  
but still a leader of the occupying Roman force.

He exhibits great faith when he sends the Jewish elders to ask Jesus for help.

Then, we learn of a grieving widow.

Nowhere is her faith highlighted by Luke or by Jesus,  
only her grief.

But perhaps in her grief,  
there is as much faith as the centurion had.

In both cases, Jesus restores life where death and illness prevail.

In both cases, unexpected individuals receive gifts of grace.

## VI

What then does faith look like?

How do we know faith when we see it?

When we are struggling under the cloud of doubt,  
can we still say we dwell in faith?

I think we can.

Both the centurion and the widow have faith.

The centurion's faith is bold,  
willing to reach out to Jesus through a number of trusted friends.

Due to the bitter hostilities between Israel and Rome,  
Jesus should have no part in healing a centurion's servant.

But the centurion asks nonetheless.

His is a **soldier's faith**.

In contrast, the widow's faith is rocked by grief and sorrow.

Her hope is muted, dampened by the loss of both husband earlier and now her son.

Jesus has compassion on her and her plight.

She too has faith, even if not like that of the centurion.

Where do you see yourself in these two portraits of faith?

Is your faith like the centurion's?

Bold?

Daring?

Willing to risk making a fool of yourself in public?

Is your faith like that of the widow?

Full of doubt and tears and grief.

Or are you somewhere in between?

Is your faith so bold, so daring, that you are willing to cry before your neighbors,  
inviting them to share your loss?

That, too, is a powerful faith, my friends.

No less powerful than that of a bold centurion.

Amen.

Sources:

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