

Matthew 8:5-13  
An Amateur Spirit  
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell  
7-12-15

---

Dave Boyd, or “Davo,” understands the power of the Word. Dave was the husband of the site coordinator from our West Virginia Mission Trip, Stephanie.

For many years, Davo served in community development and short-term mission work in his home town of Wheelwright, Kentucky. Like most communities in Eastern Kentucky and West Virginia, places like Wheelwright and Flemington struggle because the mining industry dried up. In our afternoon visits together, it became clear to me: Davo has a vision—more importantly, Davo knows the power of a Word.

A few years ago, working with World Vision domestically, Dave had the chance to meet, of all people, the former manager of the Seattle Mariners, “Sweet” Lou Pinella. And over the course of that conversation, Dave had a chance to tell him about what Jesus was doing in Wheelwright and what he saw needing to be overcome to combat extreme poverty.

Well, fast forward a few years and Dave gets a call from Lou saying that he and a multi-million dollar donor are looking for a community to invest in and he remembered Dave’s vision for providing skills-based education to unemployed coal miners in Eastern Kentucky by transforming an abandoned high school into a trade school. The three met last week in Wheelwright.

Words have transformative power. A well-placed word, one inspired by the Spirit, accompanied by an act of kindness can lead a person to the Savior and change a person’s life.

This morning, we are going to look at a story from Scripture in which the Holy Spirit’s powerful and mysterious work leads an unlikely person into the presence of Jesus where he finds healing and grace...for another.

If you would, please turn with me to Matthew chapter 8. If you are following along in the Red Pew Bible, it is found on page 7 of the New Testament. And if you are able, out of reverence and respect for the authority of God’s Word, would you stand with me as we listen to Matthew 8:5-13?

**When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.” And he said to him, “I will come and heal him.” But the centurion replied, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who**

**followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed at that very moment.**

The Holy Spirit comes into our lives as a means of grace, revealing himself through the Word of Christ. But as one commentator puts it, the Holy Spirit is the shy member of the trinity, always diverting attention away from himself and pointing you and me to Jesus. Jesus is the one whose Word brings life. Faith comes when we hear and respond to that word.

Throughout this sermon series, we have spent time each week trying to understand how the Holy Spirit is known. But what I’ve realized is that I think the shyness of the Spirit is part of His elusiveness. Like that behind-the-scenes helper, he is fully content to divert all the attention to Jesus. The Holy Spirit works his wonders in our lives when he sends us to Jesus.

This morning, Jesus encounters a man who, whether he realizes it or not, is full of the Spirit. He also happens to be a Roman Centurion. Not someone who is likely to pay a visit to a Rabbi. He’s definitely not one who would invite a rabbi to defile himself by entering his home. Centurions are the ones who give orders, not take them—particularly from Jews.

So instead, the Centurion simply says: “Jesus, only say the word and I know he will be healed.”

In the Bible, Jesus is not often impressed by those around him, particularly when it comes to their faith. But in this moment, Jesus is so moved by this stranger’s faith, that he heals his servant on the spot. What’s remarkable is that in simply hearing second- or third-hand the stories of Jesus, the centurion believed. Even hearsay fulfills the burden of proof in his mind.

How does this happen? What’s going on here?

The Spirit is just doing what he does. The great work of the Spirit, going ahead, greasing the skids, preparing the soil for the gospel to take root. You thought Google or Facebook was efficient in transmitting a message, please. The Holy Spirit is the conduit by which salvation is heard by hurting people.

There is a whole lot of arguing going on right now about whether the church still has a place in society, and what its relevance is. Will it be to support political agendas, push for legislation, convert souls, open soup kitchens, or reform society? All of these are absolutely secondary to the primary role of you, the Church. We gather, we exist for one reason: to announce the reality of the Kingdom of God in our world, doing so in the

power of the Holy Spirit. Everything else flows out of that primary responsibility, that first thing.

Now, does this mean for us that when we hear and respond to the Word that all our troubles, all our illnesses and infirmities will go away? I don't think so. Sometimes I will talk with people who will say, "I prayed and prayed and prayed and God didn't heal my grandma." Does this mean they didn't pray hard enough, or enough times? No. God doesn't heal based on the sincerity of our prayers.

So why do we pray? Because we are bringing our cares and concerns before the sovereign will of Almighty God and placing them in his hands.

The remarkable thing about this centurion's faith was not that he would be healed; it was that he had the faith to place his life in Jesus' hands. One author puts it this way: **"The amazing faith of the centurion was not in getting what he wanted to have happen. His faith was in the savior, whatever happened."** Faith is not going to Jesus with your list of requests, like Santa Claus. The Spirit gives faith to place our lives, as the centurion put it, "under the authority" of Jesus. This, Paul says, is the treasure and knowledge and wisdom that are hid in Christ.

There was something remarkable that took a Centurion Soldier, a man under authority, and captivated his heart. Could this rabbi Jesus really have something for him?

The Holy Spirit snatches up our attention, not for his own glory, not to draw attention to this other Spirit, but to point us back to Jesus—who is the way the truth and the life.

There is a beautiful painting called the Isenheim Altarpiece, painted by the German master Matthais Grunewald. It depicts the scene from the cross, Jesus hanging, nearly lifeless, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. And just to his left is John the Baptist, with that long boney finger outstretched, pointed up at Jesus. What he is saying is that all of history, all of God's Covenanted promises with Israel, are now coming to fulfillment in this man. You want to see how history – how political, how relational, how social history – finds its center, look to him.

One of my professors in seminary, Darrel Guder, used to say, it's not our job to save people, it's not our job to convert people, our job is to be witnesses to the living Christ at work in our world and say, "When you see grace, when you see transformation, when you see restoration and reconciliation, look to him. This is Jesus at work in you."

Early in ministry, a friend and mentor of mine said this to me and it has stuck ever since. He said, "Jonathan, pray for an amateur spirit." What he meant by this is don't get so drawn into the busyness of daily ministry that you lose that continued sense of excitement for the Christ we read about in Scripture. Wabash, pray that we do not fall into the hazard of insider's boredom. For we, especially we, need to hear again and again the voice of God the Father saying: "This is my priceless Son. I am deeply pleased with him."

After all, how can we ever run out of things to be excited about when our focus is, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 3, the unsearchable riches of Christ?

How else does a missionary from Wheelwright, Kentucky, end up teaching and leading, millionaires and billionaires, mega church pastors? An amateur spirit, a willingness for wonder, an openness for amazement, one that can still be humbled by God's transformative work among us. The Holy Spirit standing quietly alongside, pointing us to Jesus, who is the unsearchable riches of God lavished upon us by Holy Scripture. And for us as it was for this faith-filled centurion, all it takes is a word.