

Luke 7:1-10
Such Faith
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What a blessing it is to worship God with the full range of gifts he gives, right? Thank you Mary and Brynnlie for using movement and rhythm to express your love for Jesus. And thank you also to the men of the church for resisting the powerful urge to get up and join them—we all have our gifts.

It is so very important that we express our devotion through the range of human experience, I think we ought to lay to rest once and for all that sad and unfortunate moniker we Presbyterians have as the frozen chosen. Because when the Holy Spirit moves, like it did on Pentecost, or over the empty tomb, or when it parted the Red Sea, it makes us want to stand, and sing and shout, and yes, even dance. Psalm 107 says, “Let the redeemed of the Lord say so!”

I’m a big Bruce Springsteen fan (he’s not so big here in Indiana, but iconic in NJ) he likes to say to the crowds at his concerts, “Is there anyone alive out there!”

Well if the Boss were playing to the crowds in Galilee and Capernaum 2000 years ago, there would have been at least one voice that rose out of the crowd to say “YES!” I invite you to stand with me now as we meet this young man and his father, whom Jesus hears about and is moved to do something about their circumstance.

After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ²Now a centurion had a servant^(a) who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him. ³When the centurion^(b) heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant. ⁴And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, “He is worthy to have you do this for him, ⁵for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue.” ⁶And Jesus went with them. When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to him, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. ⁷Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸For I too am a man set 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.” ⁹When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.”¹⁰And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.

Lord, let your good news come now not only in power, but in full assurance and conviction by your Holy Spirit, who spoke with the Son, and speaks now through this your Holy Word. Let it come unto us that we might be transformed closer into the image of the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

When you think of the word authority, what comes to mind? A scholarly expert who has spent an unnatural number of years in school: “she’s the foremost authority in astrophysics.” Maybe you think about parents and their children, perhaps you sometimes wonder as I do: “who’s really in charge here?” Perhaps for you a uniform and a badge are symbols of authority, someone who is

called on serve and protect under the laws of our nation. But I would guess that when we see a man or woman in military uniform there is a feeling of respect and admiration that we feel.

I remember being on a plane once, waiting to taxi out to the runway for departure. We sat at the gate a whole 30 minutes past our departure time. Pretty soon us passengers began to get a little impatient. “Why are we still waiting? Don’t they know that I have somewhere important to be? How inconsiderate, such poor planning on whoever’s part that’s making us wait.” Then the captain came on the intercom, apologized for the delay, and let us know that the man we were waiting on was a soldier who had spent the last year in the Middle East and had not seen his wife or met his newborn daughter. He’d been off leading his troops overseas.

Then we all felt really selfish and small minded. But he then said, this guy has served our country so faithfully and for so long, let’s give him the welcome he deserves when he gets on the plane. When he arrived the whole plane full of people erupted in cheers, handshakes, hugs, this burly guy in his desert camo was weeping as he passed through the aisle.

This was not the kind of welcome the people in Jesus’ day would have offered a Roman Soldier. First century Israel was an occupied territory and the soldiers were unwelcomed intruders among the Jews. To give you an analogy, imagine the allies had lost World War II and Nazi soldiers now patrolled the streets of the US. It’s pretty unsettling to imagine, right? This is a bit like what you would have experienced in Galilee at this time. For the most part, Roman soldiers were not seen through the lens of deference and respect, but resentment and hostility.

And yet, immediately after finishing his great Sermon on the Plain, Jesus, instead of going home to put his feet up, is confronted with this unique and completely unexpected request. A Centurion has a servant and he wants your help Jesus. You sure you’ve got the right Jesus?

The first thing we can learn from this passage is that one cannot predict who will and will not receive this word. Like water, the gospel invariably finds its way down into the cracks and crevices in search of the lowest places where our deepest hurts and hopes reside. This is true of respectable church-types, it’s true of those we’d never suspect. This also makes it impossible to judge who is an is not open to that healing presence.

After college one summer I worked at a coffee shop in St Paul MN for a few months. At first I seemed to always get paired with a girl named Stephanie. She was dark and brooding, she had a gothic style and a razor-sharp wit. I was terrified of Stephanie. She always gave the impression that she was this close to flying off the handle—though I never actually saw anything to prove this suspicion.

One day as we were cleaning up late at night. I finally mustered the courage to ask her a question about herself. And as I suspected her response was terse and not terribly inviting. But to my surprise she said: “so what’s your deal?” Oh no, I’m going to have to tell her what I do. I don’t know if you know this but whenever a conversation at a party or on a plane ever turns to what a minister does, the conversation always ends immediately.

I’m studying at the seminary to be a minister. And to my great surprise she began talking to me about Jesus, and not just in vague cultural terms, like he’s a cool dude. She quoted me chapter and verse, she knew more of the Scriptures than I did. Turns out she was raised in a black Pentecostal

church and was a person who had monumental faith and a depth of wisdom that totally took me by surprise.

Jesus has the authority to move in places we least expect, and apparently he moved in the life of this centurion. This is not the way it's supposed to work. One of the great tragedies of the Church is thinking that we know what the life of someone who has been captivated by Christ will look like. In a little book by CS Lewis, called *The Great Divorce*, he imagines Heaven and Hell. Hell is a grey, dreary, overcast place and each day a bus comes to pick people up to take them up to heaven. The question people are posed with is, once they're there do they really want to stay? For one man, when he arrives he discovers that a man that he knew, a criminal who had committed a terrible crime made it to heaven before he did. And he just couldn't get over it. Why would I want to spend eternity in a place that would allow the likes of you. So he, like many got back on the bus and left.

The Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians that we are all like clay jars, earthen vessels, and the thing about clay jars—compared to gold or silver—is that the cracks and imperfections are what allow the light to shine through. On our refrigerator is a Leonard Cohen line from his song *Anthem*, that says: “Ring the bells that still can ring Forget your perfect offering There is a crack in everything That's how the light gets in.”

Now in Matthew's gospel it says that the centurion himself comes to lay his request at Jesus' feet. Luke's account is a little different, giving us a different angle to understand this text. Luke says that the centurion sends an elder of the synagogue to plead his case before Jesus. Surprisingly this centurion has great compassion and love for the Jewish community in Capernaum. It even says that the centurion served as something of a benefactor for the community, building their synagogue for them. And as a result, the Jews—who otherwise disdained the Roman authority—make his case for him.

We don't know why the centurion won't or can't come to Jesus himself. But maybe there's a lesson in there for us. For some people coming to Jesus is tremendously difficult, even though they may want it more than anything in the world. With everything they've got they want to believe, but it's just too difficult. With everything they've got they long for community that will receive them with love and acceptance, but they've been hurt one too many times by self-professing friendly churches. Or perhaps, like the centurion, what they do for a living does not fit with what is socially acceptable for church folks. I've spoken with more than a few of you over the last few years who after telling me about your job, will follow that with a story of how you were rejected by a faith community, because that's not what decent Christian people do.

Do not underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit to cultivate faith in places we least expect. Jesus says they will come from east and west and join me at the banquet table.

Jesus, Paul says in Romans chapter 1 was sent first to the Jews, but later on in verse 11 he compares the people of God to the Olive Tree, where Gentile branches are grafted in through faith. Jesus was first sent to the Jews and then to the Gentiles, salvation then is not something that is inherited by birth, but only received by faith in Jesus. Later in Galatians 3:7 Paul says that the Jews are Abraham's offspring by birth, but all who believe in Jesus are Abraham's offspring through faith.

For this Centurion, he knew that by rights he had no place with Jesus. He knew that he was undeserving of coming before God on his own, and in this way he had a more healthy notion of the sinfulness of humanity than the religious did. None of us is deserving, we're all dead to rights. But this man had a loved one who was in crisis, and when a loved one is in crisis, people will reveal their true colors. We saw it last week in the Canaanite woman who'd daughter was in crisis. Our story today say that: **When Jesus was a little ways off, the centurion once again sent someone out to him saying: "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed.**

Jesus' power is manifest most fully not in the lives of those who believe they are worthy and deserving, but precisely in those who know they are not. When we face the reality that apart from Jesus is only death, physical death or the deadness of how we are living, then the gospel is ready to make alive again. Eugene Peterson says the place where we find Jesus is always at the end of our ropes. When Jesus hears of this unlikely man of faith, it says: **he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.**

Authority, the kind of authority Jesus has always leads to restoration and healing, but it always goes through the cross first. Paradoxically it is the weakness of the cross in which Jesus' is most fully defining moment, the moment in which his authority is most truly exhibited for liberation, for restoration, for redemption to make people whole. All of our worldly definitions of authority are stood on their head. Jesus is not coercing, not dominating, not imposing, not physically crushing, not controlling, Jesus comes with a different authority. And where we might be tempted to say I know what authority is like and so this must be what Jesus is like, we're going to need to look at Jesus and see what authority is like. Jesus' authority is power working to make things whole. And what if that authority was unleashed on earth. What if God did something crazy and God sent his Holy Spirit and he decided to give that authority to you and me, what if he said something outlandish like all authority in heaven and on earth is given to me, now go and make disciples in my name. You go and be a city on a hill, you go and be a light to all nations. What if we exhibited not our authority, but Jesus' authority.

This is exactly what Pentecost means, this is what happened at Pentecost. As the Father has sent me, so I send you Acts 1:8.

So where do we begin? We pay attention to the people Jesus paid attention to.