

“Simon Says”

Pastor Jan Shannon

May 29, 2016

Scripture:

Luke 7:1-10 (NRSV)

Jesus Heals a Centurion's Servant

7 After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ² Now a centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him. ³ When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant. ⁴ And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, “He is worthy to have you do this for him, ⁵ for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue.” ⁶ And 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. ⁷ Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸ For 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.” ⁹ When 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.” ¹⁰ And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.

The Sermon:

We all have power.

If I had the power, I’d give you all the kind of faith in God that the centurion had. I’d just say, ‘Simon says, “Believe!”’ and you would all believe. But I don’t have that kind of power.

The centurion belonged to the militia of Herod Antipas. He was likely one of the God-fearers... (God-fearers... I like that! The word “Christian” has become so distorted in our

culture, that it has virtually lost all meaning, but God-fearers...I like that!) These God-fearers were non-Jews who were attracted to Judaism because of its monotheism and ethical teachings. These God-fearers attended Jewish prayer and worship services and kept all the major commandments, including a respect for the separation of Jews from non-Jews, but the God-fearers were reluctant to abandon their ethnic group by taking the final step of circumcision. (who could blame them?)

It was likely out of this respect for the Jewish practice of keeping separate from non-Jews, that caused the centurion to send a delegation to Jesus rather than go to Jesus himself. Respect: an excellent quality for someone in power to have. Why does the centurion send for Jesus? The centurion knew when he was in over his head. He was a man of reason, of practicality, and of power. He knew how to use his social and political capital to get what he wanted. He sent the Jewish leaders to speak well of him, to influence Jesus to help him.

And why are these Jewish leaders willing to go on this errand for a Roman? The Roman army was in invading force in the land of the Jews, so why would some Jewish leaders want to help a Roman centurion? Because the centurion has demonstrated love and compassion for the Jews, he has even built them a synagogue in Capernaum. Love and compassion stand at the heart of the Law, and it was the centurion's love and compassion that wins him the admiration of the Jewish leaders. It was not just because the centurion built the synagogue, but rather why he built it; out of love, compassion, and respect.

Jesus, moved by the testimony of the Jewish leaders, sets out for the centurion's house, but while Jesus was still on the way, another delegation shows up. The gospel of Luke calls this group 'friends' of the centurion, and this word 'friends' is rarely used in the New Testament. This centurion must be someone very special. All the stereotypical images of the cruel and heartless Roman soldiers fly right out the window when we encounter this man, this centurion.

The centurion's friends bring a first-person message from him, and the word they speak are among my favorite passages of scripture. "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 only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also 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 slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it."

What a humble man he is! True humility does not lie in devaluing yourself or your abilities, but instead, true humility acknowledges our talents and abilities, our privilege and power, yet at the same time acknowledges that we are not the highest authority...we are not God. Juxtapose this line, "For I also 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 slave, 'Do

this,' and the slave does it." with this line, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof." The centurion acknowledges his power and privilege and at the same time shows his true humility in stating, "I am not worthy for YOU, Jesus, to come under my roof."

"I am not a Jew," the centurion says, "So I know you, Jesus, can't come under my roof without defiling yourself and becoming ritually unclean. So, don't trouble yourself." This was a practical man. He didn't waste Jesus' time by having him come all the way up to the house. No, he sent his friends to tell Jesus not to bother. The centurion knew he was not worthy, not clean by Jewish standards, so he asked for Jesus to just heal the servant from a distance.

And he calls Jesus, "Lord." Before Jesus has done anything to help the centurion, this Roman soldier calls Jesus, "Lord." Here we see this man's faith. Faith believes before action happens. Hebrews 11:1 says, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Surely the centurion had heard of Jesus' miracles; the blind seeing, the lame walking, but as far as we know, he had seen it himself. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." But the proof of the depth of the centurion's faith lies not just in his calling Jesus, Lord, but in these particular words, "But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed."

You see, people in those days believed in miraculous healings, but they thought that direct contact with the person mediating the divine healing power was necessary. In contrast, the centurion believes Jesus' commanding word, even from a distance, is sufficient to heal his slave. The centurion does not trust in Jesus' magical abilities; he trusts in Jesus' person. The centurion trusts in Jesus because he perceives in Jesus an authority which places Jesus above the lower earthly elements. The centurion had power – he could order men to war - to their deaths. What greater power is there, than to order someone to their death? To order someone back to life. That's a higher power, and the centurion knew it when he saw it. This knowledge gave him humility, and he humbly asked Jesus to heal his servant.

This centurion was a practical man, a thoughtful man, a reasonable man, but not everything can be proven through reason, though it would be nice if it could. Some things in life are outside our understanding, outside our ability to reason, and for those times, we need faith. When the centurion was faced with a situation in which his power failed, where he was powerless, he chose to seek a higher power. He sent for the one he had heard about – the one who could heal. It is this deep level of trust in Jesus' person and authority by the centurion which Jesus finds "amazing." Luke tells us, "When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."

Love, compassion, respect, humility, and faith. These are the qualities of the centurion. Powerful, life-giving qualities. You know the old joke, that the right answer in church is always, “Jesus,” but today, the right answer is “the centurion.” Luke gives us the centurion as our example for life. To be loving to the stranger, to have compassion for our neighbor, respect for the beliefs of others, humility in regard to ourselves, and to be a person of faith.

Life is about choices. Every day brings new decisions to make. One type of decision we must occasionally make, is about our power.

We all have power. Some people have jobs that give them the power to tell other folks what to do, to order them around, like this centurion. There’s another kind of power called capital. Cultural capital, social capital, political capital, this the ability or power one gains and trades in different socio-political arenas either for the benefit of all or for the benefit of themselves. This Roman centurion is our example in how to make wise choices.

- Love the stranger in your midst
- Show compassion for your neighbor, even if they are very different than you
- Respect the beliefs of others, even if you do not agree with them
- Live in humility, in relation to other people and to God
- Have faith in a higher power – you can’t do it all on your own.

This centurion had real power. His story is still told over 2,000 years after he lived and died, but the story of his faithfulness lives on. The centurion still has the power to teach us something, if we allow it to.

Will you recognize the power you have, and act wisely? And, when faced with a situation you cannot control, will you admit that you are powerless and seek a higher power? If I had the power, I’d give you all the kind of faith in God that the centurion had, but I don’t have that kind of power. I wish I did. ‘Simon says, “Believe!”’ No? No. It’s up to each of us to choose. Amen.