

Grace Episcopal Church
June 2, 2013 – Proper 4C
Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.

Text--Luke 7: 1-10

Now and again we encounter a truly remarkable character in our readings. That is going to be the case for each of the next few weeks as we enter the l-o-o-ong green season after Pentecost in the year of Luke. This season focuses on Jesus' ministry, and the readings begin right after he has delivered his Sermon on the Plain (roughly equivalent to his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel). His interaction with these characters will help to establish his identity. His identity as more than just one of many itinerant preachers and miracle workers. His identity as someone unique and extraordinary--even greater than a prophet--will emerge as he travels the countryside teaching and healing, preaching in parables and casting out demons, dining with sinners and challenging those who have become stuck in religious practices for their own sake.

Today's remarkable character is a centurion. He has no name. We do not even see him in this story, as he has sent others to Jesus with his request for the healing of his desperately ill servant. Even when Jesus agrees to go to him, he sends the message that Jesus' presence is not necessary. His word alone will suffice to accomplish the healing. Long distance pastoral care! It reminds me a bit of current debates as to whether people can receive healing or even communion remotely, over the internet!

But this story goes deeper than that. This nameless centurion, a gentile, has been lifted up as a model of faith—one who causes Jesus to be amazed. And that, in itself, is amazing. We do not see that many instances of Jesus' emotions.

Who is this centurion? Under ordinary circumstances he would be looked at with mistrust, because he represents the oppressors, the Roman occupation, non-Jews in a Jewish society. Since Capernaum, in the Galilee, is a rather unexciting outpost, at least compared to someplace like Jerusalem, he probably reports to Herod. As a centurion, by definition, he is a trained military officer who commands 100 men. He gives orders, and obeys orders himself from higher authorities.

What is different about this man is his relationship with the surrounding community. He has clearly built trust with its Jewish leaders who are more than willing to testify to Jesus on his behalf. They say that he loves their people and even built their synagogue. And he seems to genuinely care for his ill servant—more than just because the servant is useful and of economic benefit to him.

We might ask ourselves why he sends the elders to Jesus instead of going himself. It could

be a power game, I suppose, insisting that Jesus come onto his turf. But then, he plays the humility card; “I am not worthy for you to come under my roof. Just say the word.” He draws the comparison about his own experience in giving orders and exerting his authority. Could it be that he is sensitive to the Jewish Law—that Jesus should not come into his home, should not touch his servant because of violating the purity codes?

Jesus heals the servant and tells those with him of his amazement at this centurion’s faith.

It is the centurion’s faith that has been gnawing at me all week. Just what kind of faith is this? I suppose we might say that he was desperate and grasping at any available straw. Or we could be cynical and say that he simply took advantage of one who was reported to have healed others. But this seems deeper.

Commentators from Luther Seminary suggest that the centurion is not necessarily just a model of faith for us to emulate. He has heard of these Jesus and his healing acts, so he ascribes authority to Jesus using his own categories of authority from his military life. This gives him confidence in Jesus, an expectation that Jesus can effect this healing with a word.

And that is where my wondering is this week. For many years, I have been part of a faith tradition that welcomes and even encourages our questioning and our doubts, over and against what we think of as “blind faith.” That kind of faith that we disparage as what comes from believing just what we are told to believe, whether it a biblical literalists who “proof text” the Bible or those who passively accept the doctrine and pronouncements of the church hierarchy. My Congregational/United Church of Christ heritage brags that our churches don’t require that we leave our brains outside the doors. I have found it to be the same in the Episcopal Church. Just a few weeks ago, I quoted Bp. Gene Robinson who explained what it meant to be an Episcopalian on the Colbert Report: “It’s like AP (Advanced Placement) religion—we’re expected to use our brains.”

I confess that without that kind of inclusiveness, I would probably not be in the church today. And yet, and yet...my wondering this week has been about this centurion. His expectation—his absolute confidence in Jesus’ authority and ability to respond to his request. How might my/how might our lives of faith and our prayers be affected with that kind of confidence? Are there some things that we might just accept and expect?

In my ministry, I hear people lamenting about times when God seems far away or absent, when they don’t feel that God hears their prayers. Mostly because they don’t think their prayers are answered. What if they could be assured that God does hear. And God does answer, even if that answer is not exactly what they expect?

I hear people say that they can’t believe that God really loves them (I was one of these for a long while). How could God love them when they continued to fall short in the same ways time and time again? What if even that very foundational claim could be accepted, expected? What difference would that make?

Just before this encounter, Jesus was teaching. He told the story about the two men who built houses--one with a deep foundation of rock that withstood winds and floods, the other with no foundation at all that washed away in the first storm. I'm thinking this is about trust. The centurion recognizes something in Jesus that is familiar to him. His authority? The community of disciples who respect and follow him? Perhaps it is both, and they become his foundation of trust. We need such foundations, too. That doesn't mean we can't question, or even doubt. But it seems to me that there must be a solid center if we are to withstand the storms of life. Will that center be our savings accounts? Our professional success? Or will it be our trust in God? And God's ability to make us whole?

Like the centurion, we need humility, too. Jewish elders claimed that the centurion was worthy of Jesus' attention. The centurion said he was not worthy. He had no need to beat his breast and brag about his accomplishments and good deeds. Those things did not serve him in his time of need. In the best way he knew, he humbly asked—and received. May his trust be a model for us.

Amen and amen.

Note: a sermon is an oral act and art, not primarily a document or manuscript. It is, therefore, to the extent possible, written as it will be spoken, not as a composition teacher might expect. In addition, there are undoubtedly modifications made in the preaching moment which might not be represented here.