

The Good Centurion

^{NRS} **Luke 7:1** After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ² A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. ³ When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. ⁴ When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, ⁵ for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." ⁶ And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say 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 only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸ 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." ⁹ 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." ¹⁰ When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

The Good Centurion

A centurion was an officer of the Roman army, a commander of one hundred men. It was a prestigious position. It paid well, fifty to one hundred times the pay of an ordinary soldier. A centurion was even paid well after he retired. Every now and then in the gospels and in the book of Acts we run into centurions. A centurion supervised the crucifixion of Jesus. Centurions were involved in the arrest of Paul in Jerusalem. Centurions transferred the Apostle Paul to the custody of Felix, the district governor. It was a centurion that escorted Paul as a prisoner to Rome. Those were certainly negative encounters with centurions.

On the other hand, there's the story about Peter and Cornelius, a centurion in Caesarea and today's text about Jesus and a centurion in Capernaum. Back in Luke 4:31-41 we can read where Jesus had healed various people in Capernaum, including Peter's mother-in-law. While the gospel writers weren't always concerned with making sure every thing was told in exact chronological order, it appears that perhaps Jesus had healed in Capernaum before. Perhaps the centurion in Capernaum had heard of Jesus' works during earlier visits to the town.

The relationships between Jews and non-Jews were always complex. The laws of purity required some separation between Jews and Gentiles. On the other hand, the Law of Moses also required that strangers and aliens be treated fairly, with great hospitality, and that there couldn't be different laws for Gentiles than for Jews.

As I began to look at this story in Luke, I noticed how the centurion never met with Jesus, never saw him face to face, but sent emissaries to plead his case with Jesus. The Jewish emissaries praised the centurion so highly that I wondered why this wasn't known as the story of the good centurion, and I put that down as the title of the sermon. And, since the centurion never met Jesus, the statement that Jesus made to Thomas after the resurrection came to mind. **John 20:29** "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." The story of this centurion in Luke chapter seven seemed to be an example of how today, we who have not personally met Jesus face to face, can, like this centurion, still have strong faith in Christ.

It's often helpful to go look to see if another gospel has the same event in it. One writer may include details that another leaves out. By looking at all of the accounts, one can often get a clearer picture, a more complete understanding. At other times, when we look at the various gospel accounts, the result is a bit of confusion. In this case, Luke very clearly tells about two groups of people that meet Jesus on behalf of the Centurion, who is too humble to meet Jesus himself. But, Matthew tells us that the centurion met with Jesus personally. So much for the good centurion and faith in one not seen. What do we do with this obvious difference? Various approaches have been made to this and to other passages where a story is told differently in different places.

One choice is to ignore the difference. Never look at but one account at a time. If you always preach, teach, or study only one text at a time, then you'll never be confronted with this situation. That's not

a good option because it amounts to putting our head in the sand. Thus we have the long held practice of letting scripture interpret scripture.

A second approach is to try to find ways to inter-mix the accounts so that you end up with one single story. Popular culture does that with the Christmas story. Most people have no idea that the wise men bearing gifts doesn't appear in the same gospel where the shepherds visit the manger. Nor do they know that one gospel talks about Mary and Joseph taking Jesus to the temple, while the other gospel talks about taking Jesus to Egypt. The same sort of interleaving is done with the resurrection stories. But, in this story about Jesus and the centurion in Capernaum, that approach is difficult because it's hard to have the centurion both talking to Jesus and refusing to meet him.

For some people, running across passages that are so incompatible with each other causes them a great deal of tension and turmoil. They absolutely must find some way, however convoluted, to resolve the differences. Others, say the differences are the result of oral tradition before the books were written, or the different viewpoint of the writers involved, or because the books were written to different audiences. Unfortunately, some people find differences in scripture to be so distressing that they decide that scripture is unreliable and they walk away from the Bible, the church, and any faith they might have had.

There is another way to deal with this, a way to hold scripture up as truth, as trustworthy, as reliable, as "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word" for us. We Presbyterians take the scriptures seriously, very seriously. We study them at considerable depth. We look for overarching themes. We seek to know the whole forest, rather than being focused on one or two trees. We look for the main points, because until we see and understand them, we're liable to misunderstand some of the details. We can concentrate so closely on whether the bread of communion must be unleavened bread, that we lose all joy and experience of the Holy Spirit in the Lord's Supper. We can get so tied up in what style of music is used in worship that we forget that worship is to be directed to God, not to satisfy our tastes in entertainment. We can get so wrapped up in details of worship style that we forget to worship. We can be so focused on some point of belief that we never get around to being servants of God. We can concentrate so much on morality, that we become judgmental and lose sight of loving and forgiving.

So, in this story of the centurion, told two different ways, what is the truth being presented, what is the message being proclaimed, what are we to hear for our lives?

First, don't judge a book by its cover. The man was a Roman officer, a centurion. They generally weren't known for their warmth and kindness toward the local folks in the colonies. But this centurion doesn't fit the mold. Luke tells us that the Jews felt loved by this officer and that he had built a synagogue for them. Both Matthew and Luke tell us that he cared a great deal for a servant or slave who was in physical distress. In addition, either directly or indirectly, the centurion approached a Jew, and asked for a favor.

The centurion gives us a good example of how we should act when we're in positions of authority, wealth, or power. He genuinely cared for those under his authority. He not only paid attention to them, he went beyond anything that was expected of him to be generous to them. In today's language, he appears to have been winning the hearts and minds of the local Jewish population. And this military officer cared deeply about the health and comfort of his servant.

Do you want to impress Jesus? Jesus wasn't impressed with the centurion's wealth. He wasn't impressed with his social status. Jesus certainly wasn't known for buttering up to the powers that be, whether they were Sadducees or Romans. The man wasn't of the house of Israel, one of the chosen people. The centurion impressed Jesus because he did three things. First, he asked. He didn't command Jesus. He didn't assume that the Jesus would heal his servant. No, the message was, "I care a great deal for this person who's my servant and he's suffering. Please help him."

Second, the centurion, despite his wealth, power, and position, was humble. He said, "I'm not worthy to welcome you into my home." He could have said, "I know about the rules of cleanliness. It would be awkward for you to come to my place." No, he said, "I'm unworthy to be your host."

Third, in those days, it was expected that the healer must touch the one to be healed for healing to take place. We still see some of that in the stylized faith healings of some TV evangelists today. But the centurion said, "I know that all you have to do is say the word. I trust you and trust your power. You have the authority to make things happen with words alone. I understand this because people obey me and I know

that this illness will obey you." And Jesus was impressed and said, "This is stronger trust than I have found among my own people!"

Do you want to follow in the steps of Jesus? Notice what he did here. He didn't see if the one in need of healing qualified in some way. He didn't have the disciples visit to evaluate the level of need or to see if the servant was deserving of help. Jesus didn't check to see if the centurion had done all he could in this situation. I'd call it a pretty sloppy process, but there doesn't seem to have been any process at all. Jesus wasn't healing someone of his own family, or his own village. He wasn't healing a fellow Jew, nor some important foreign official like Elisha did when he healed the leper Naaman. Jesus healed a person of no social significance, no power, no influence, just the slave in the household of a foreigner. Peter wouldn't figure it out until much later, but here was a clear example of how Jesus was no respecter of persons, but was clearly compassionate and caring about the least of these in society. Do you want to follow Jesus? Help the poor and the powerless find healing.

How can you do this? This past week I saw a presentation about the Mercy Ship, a hospital ship that spends ten months each year providing surgery and other health services to poor African nations, visiting a different nation each year. You can support Christian medical missionaries through the missionary programs of the Presbyterian Church. You can support the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance program which has given \$ 200,000 to help repair a hospital in Haiti. Those are international concerns. Nationally, you can help keep the health care debate focused on care for the least among us, and less distracted by the protection of various vested interests. But, you may be more interested in something even closer to home. Cathy volunteers at Davidson Medical Ministries Clinic one night a week and so I've come to know a little bit about this ministry. Davidson Medical Ministries Clinic provides basic health services to those who aren't covered by insurance. So many are in this situation, because of the high percentage of people who are unemployed, or who can only find part-time work and are therefore not covered by employer health insurance plans. I have learned that that ministry is stretched to the breaking point by current needs and they badly need both financial and volunteer support. Do you want to follow Jesus? Help the poor and the powerless find healing. Amen.

^{NRS} **1 Kings 8:41** "Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name⁴² -- for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm-- when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house,⁴³ then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built.

^{NRS} **John 20:29** Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

^{NRS} **Matthew 8:5** When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him⁶ and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress."⁷ And he said to him, "I will come and cure him."⁸ The centurion answered, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed."⁹ For I also 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 slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it."¹⁰ When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith."¹¹ I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,¹² while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."¹³ And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; let it be done for you according to your faith." And the servant was healed in that hour.