

### **Sermon on Luke Seven:1-10**

When we hear this story about the centurion it is often lifted up as an example of great faith; which it is. Here's someone who believes that all Jesus has to do is say the word and his servant will be healed, but being so far removed from Jesus' time and not living in an occupied country; we miss just how jarring and unexpected this story is—even Jesus is surprised by the centurion's faith as Luke describes him as being amazed!

Here was a man who was used to giving orders and having them followed and the orders that were being followed concerned the Jewish people. He was a Roman centurion after all and he enforced Rome's rule over Israel. He is directly responsible for Israel's occupation.

So why would Luke include this very positive story about a Roman centurion in his Gospel? Could it be to show his readers that just because this man is a Roman centurion it doesn't mean he is incapable of doing good? Luke already reports that the Jewish leaders come to plead this man's case with Jesus; reporting that he helped them to build a synagogue.

It makes him out to be more complex than we'd like people in the Gospel stories to be, doesn't it? Here's a man who is a Roman centurion and a man who does good for those in the community in which he's living. He's part of the army that is oppressing Israel and he builds a synagogue for the people in the town under his authority. This story helps us to remember not to judge people based on only one aspect of who they are. You remember the old saying, "Don't judge a book by its cover."

We had an example of this very sentiment this past week when Pope Francis reminded us that all people are redeemed by Christ's death and resurrection. He invited those listening to meet all people, whether they believe or not, at the place of doing good works. He included the fact that atheists are also redeemed by Christ and invited to do good works as well and this shocked many people.

But we really shouldn't be shocked at this at all. We have a God who regularly shows up where we don't expect to find God and never, ever stops in delighting in surprising us! What we should be concerned about is the fact that we consider them unlikely and unexpected in the first place. In our story today, Jesus commends the centurion for his faith even though we have no reason to believe that he's a follower of Jesus or that he becomes a follower of Jesus! He just recognizes the authority that Jesus has and that he needs. He may become a follower; he may not. But that's not important to Jesus or to Luke.

This is good news for many of us here today. Why, you ask. Because many of us have loved ones, be they parents, children, siblings, or friends who aren't going to church or may not even believe in Jesus at all. What this Gospel story does is to let this person know that they are also beloved children of God; that God still works through them to do good things; that they may demonstrate a faith that even Jesus would commend.

I have two brothers whose relationship with the church hasn't been very good. One brother I've talked about already how he left the church because he felt it was full of hypocrites. He is slowly coming back and is now regularly worshipping. My other brother has no desire to worship and has no use for God

in his life. He uses the farm and his busyness as an excuse not to worship. This has bothered my parents for a long time because we weren't brought up that way. We went to church as a family every Sunday—my dad included. My mom has decided that she wants to have communion at her funeral because she believes it would be one way to get my brother to take it!

But my mom has done more than this; she also asked the rest of us to pray for my brothers that their faith may be strengthened. It's worked for one and I hope it will work for the other. And that's what I'm going to ask you all to do today; pray for those in your lives whose faith is faltering. Give thanks to God for them and the good work that God can do through them. Pray for the courage and grace to tell them that you are proud of the good that they do and that you thank God for them and that God loves them.

And then take the time to pray that we are less surprised by who God works through to do good in this world. Pray that God would open our hearts and minds to see that God's love goes far beyond the walls of our church. The God who showed up in the unexpected place of a crucified criminal regularly shows up where we don't expect God to be and thanks be to God for that! We now take time to pray.