

May 29 – A Centurion's Faith
Scripture: Luke 7:1-10

We see goodness on many different levels when we look at the Centurion. It begins with the concern he has for a servant. Yes, the servant was important to him but this was a time when life was cheap. For a master to have more than a passing worry for a servant, except in how his death would be an inconvenience, is surprising and says something about the centurion. We also learn that he was known for doing good deeds. This was told to Jesus by the Jewish leaders, a group not normally willing to heap praise on a Roman soldier. They even share that he used his money to build them a synagogue. They said all of this because they wanted to impress Jesus. They felt they needed to prove that this Gentile soldier's request was worth being granted.

The interesting thing to note is that it was not his status or his good deeds that impressed Jesus. As they were headed to the house a friend of the centurion stops Jesus to share what the centurion was thinking saying, "Lord don't be bothered. In fact I didn't even consider myself worthy to come to you. Just say the word and my servant will be healed." He doesn't request, bribe or demand. He acknowledges Jesus can heal if Jesus wants. That's it. It was this trust in God working through Jesus and his humility that caused Jesus to proclaim that he had not found faith like this anywhere else in Israel.

Humbleness is a trait often lifted up in the Bible. Jesus often encourages people to humble themselves. We are told a humble and contrite heart God will not despise. One of the major accusations against many of the ancient kings of Israel was that they were not humble before God. It seems that humbleness is a trait that is admired in people of faith but so often lacking. This is why Jesus was impressed when he found a truly humble man.

We need to understand that a centurion was a man of importance. They were the professional officer corps of their day. The more senior centurions had risen through the ranks to a position equivalent to that of a staff officer. Since this centurion had the resources to build a synagogue we can assume that he was likely the most senior soldier in the area. In a militaristic state such as Rome's this meant that he had great power and influence over the lives of all the citizens. He could have commanded Jesus

to heal his servant with the implication that he would be arrested or killed if he did not comply. He had the resources to offer a bribe for this to be done. At the very least he could command that Jesus come to him. Yet, he sends people with his request. He finally says that he isn't worthy to have Jesus come into his house. He, a Roman centurion, feels inadequate in the face of an itinerant Jewish preacher! You can see why Jesus is amazed.

Humbleness is so important. In some translations of the Beatitudes we hear, "Blessed are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth." I think humbleness is such a sought for element of faith because it gets the self out of the center of our focus. It opens us up to God instead of all of our energy being focused on what we want. You see this playing out in the story. The Centurion is worried about his slave. He asks some of the leaders to go to Jesus for help. The more he thinks about this, prays about it, the more he realizes that he is trying to tell God what to do. That is why he sends a friend a bit later to tell Jesus to not bother coming. He trusts that if it is God's will for his servant to be healed it will happen. Jesus can speak the word without having to set foot in his house.

This is the second thing humbleness does. It causes us to let go and no longer try to be in control of the situation. In the Old Testament when you have the prophets scolding the Kings of Israel for not being humble, the problem was that they were trying to solve problems on their terms. They would make alliances, fight wars and a whole bunch of other things because they wanted to be in control. It was hard for them to let go and trust God. Most of them did not do this and the result was calamity for their kingdoms.

Think about your life and where you are desperately struggling to be in control. The story of the centurion is a reminder that sometimes we have to let go and admit that we are not going to be in charge. We have to get ourselves out of the center of the situation. That is sometimes the hardest thing we are called to do.

Finally, in humbleness the Centurion was accepting of what would happen. This is the part that so amazed Jesus. He acknowledged that Jesus could heal his servant but did not demand it. He didn't even imply that Jesus should or must do this. He instead trusted that whatever happened was of God. Sure, he wanted his servant to be

healed. If this happened he would rejoice. If the servant was not healed he would be sad but you do not sense that he would have been angry at Jesus for not healing the servant or mad at God. He would have accepted. As a man under authority he realized that you follow orders. Jesus was under authority and so what ever happened must be of God.

Jesus had met people who humbled themselves. I think of Zacchaeus, the tax collector, who climbed a tree to see Jesus, or Nicodemus who came to Jesus to talk when he, a member of the ruling elite, might be belittled by his fellow Sanhedrin members for giving Jesus any credibility. Jesus had also seen people let go of control of situations and turn it over to God. I think of the disciples who were willing to follow him when there was no assurance of what that meant, or the boy who offers his lunch to help feed a crowd never believing that 5,000 would be fed. But finding people who are willing to accept what God will do, instead of expecting their will to be done, that is unique. Beyond the centurion I think of the father of the epileptic boy who says, "I believe, help my unbelief." To find a humble, trusting, individual who lets go of control and ultimately trusts in God is a rare thing. Jesus had not encountered it in his life, and most of us rarely find it as well.

I think of a man in one of my congregations. All in the church knew he was one of the wealthiest men in the community. But to see him, you would never know it. He never threw his economic weight around. He was a very humble person. This everyone knew. What they didn't know was the things he did behind the scenes. I recall him coming to me one time as the church was getting ready to remodel. I had just been in conversations with another person who was willing to give a large sum to the building program but he wanted everyone to know he gave and he also wanted to make sure certain things were done the way he wanted them done. Gene came in to talk about the building program. He was so supportive of the work of the building committee, the vision they had and all that could be done. He asked me about several things wondering why they were not part of the project. I admitted that people would like to see those items done but the money just wasn't there. He sat for a bit and then said, "I can help with that." His help was to fund two major additional pieces. "But I have two conditions." I prepared myself for what that would be. "The first is that you be the only one who knows

I gave.” He wanted to hand me the check and I deposit it in the bank. “The second is that the building committee be given full authority to do the project.” He didn’t want some smaller group to come in and take over that part of the project when they heard there was money. Part of what he was funding was the kitchen and he knew how special interest groups could desire control. He thought the building committee had done good work and wanted them to continue. He trusted the process and whatever happened would be fine.

The servant was healed, Jesus was impressed, and we were taught a valuable lesson by the centurion. We need to be humble, to let go, to trust and in humility accept what happens. Our prayer should be to learn and live this kind of faith.