

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector**  
**Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania**  
**on the Second Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 4, Year C**  
**May 29, 2016**

***Luke 7:1-10***

Are you good enough for God, worthy of divine attention and even love? The Gospel of Luke tells a story about this in the healing of the Centurion's servant. We have a stained glass window of the Centurion. Pulpit side in the nave, lower window, second from back, bottom of window.

Who was this Centurion that became a model of faith and got his own stained glass window? He was stationed in Capernaum as an officer in the mercenary army of Herod Antipas, a ruler appointed by Rome. He commanded about 80-100 men, hence the title Centurion. Most likely he earned his rank by ability rather than connections. He was a Gentile foreigner, not a Jew. He was generous, fair, and appreciated a culture different from his own. And he loved his servant so much he was willing to risk his reputation through potential ridicule and rejection by Jesus, the religious elders he oversaw, and the soldiers he commanded. His friend was dying so he reached out to the only person he believed could help. Note in the story that Jesus and the Centurion never encounter one another – they never met.

Before this, Jesus had just finished some of his most significant teaching about the Kingdom of God. Then he went to Capernaum, a fishing village on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Several of the disciples grew up nearby. Jesus used the village as a type of base of operations for much of his teaching. While there, he was met by a group of Jewish elders who spoke on behalf of the Centurion; he had a servant who was dying. It is good to have a friend on the inside who can put in a good word for you. They spoke highly of him saying he was kind and just and even built their church for them. He was not like most of those nasty soldiers. They said this Centurion was **worthy, good enough** to heal his slave. So Jesus went with them.

When they got close to the Centurion's house, the group was met by friends of his who told them the Centurion believed himself not worthy enough for Jesus to enter his home. It was true by Law and custom that the soldier was not someone with whom Jesus should associate let alone heal a friend of his. Yet, the Centurion understood authority and power and loved his friend who was dying more than Law or custom or what everyone thought about his actions. If Jesus said so, it would be done. At this, Jesus was amazed and said he had never seen anyone in Israel who had so much faith. And then the slave was healed.

Nice story. So what? The story is often told to show the Centurion as an exemplar of humility and faith. That is true and I don't mean to diminish it. But consider – if someone you loved was dying what wouldn't you do to keep them alive? All he did, at one level, was ask for help. Was it the flattery of humility that worked? How is that the greatest faith Jesus ever saw?

The Centurion may have had faith in Jesus but did not trust that Jesus had faith in him. He still was concerned about his worthiness to have God do something for him. Good behavior equaled divine favor. Is that not just a form of bargaining with God? The Jewish elders were concerned about it too and told Jesus he was worthy of having this done for him. He is good, or at least not as bad as the others, so please do this for him. And by helping this soldier, who rules over us, you are actually

doing us a favor, too. Thanks. Incidentally, no mention is ever made of the slave who was dying as worthy of being healed or not; he doesn't really count.

Everyone seemed to be concerned with the worthiness of the person asking for help... everyone but Jesus. Jesus did not care about those cultural distinctions the way everyone else did – and does. Talking about worthiness or correct religious belief is just another way of saying who is in and who is out of the cool kids' club or the Church or the Kingdom of God, for that matter. Jesus had just taught about what living in God's kingdom, Heaven on Earth, was like. He kept telling everyone who would listen... it does not matter who your family is, how rich or poor you are, what gender or race or class or group you belong to, or what you have or have not done in the past that matters. Something in the Centurion's action caught his attention.

In the Gospels, Jesus rarely responded emotionally to an event. The end of this story is one of the few times it occurs. With the Centurion's action, Jesus was amazed. This was a big deal, according to Luke. "I've never seen such faith in all of Israel." Here is trust in God in action that I have just been teaching about. A foreigner, an officer in the occupying army who is a pagan and our sworn enemy... that is who understands the message about the Kingdom. God's grace is available to all, without exceptions. The Centurion, the Jewish elders, even the slave were worthy of divine attention and love. In God's Kingdom, we all are, that's the point.

Part of what reveals the impact of this story is *where* it occurs in the overall narrative. Luke, the Gospel writer, *chose* to place this story here. It was an editorial decision to make a point. It occurs immediately after Jesus delivered a now famous teaching about the Kingdom of God we usually call the Sermon on the Plain. Why locate the healing story there?

The event illustrates vividly much of what Jesus had just been teaching in one story people could remember. Here, in the faith of the Centurion and his actions, is what living in the Kingdom of God looks like. Blessed are you who are poor or weep or when others insult you. Love your enemies. Turn the other cheek. Don't judge and you won't be judged. Do unto others as you would have them do to you. Bear good fruit. Give to everyone who asks of you. Remove the log from your own eye before pointing out the splinter in your neighbor's eye, and so on.

Jesus was amazed because the Centurion began to understand all this before his own disciples. I can imagine him saying, "You are saved now act like you have been saved. You are free, now quit trying to put yourself and others back in jail. You are forgiven and healed, you are worthy, you are loved... now go and love in action." It was not humility before Jesus that was amazing but an openness to God's Kingdom breaking into his own life. Love in action is what matters.

What does it mean for *us* to live in the Kingdom of God? When have you helped someone who could never hope to repay you? When have you risked your reputation to do the right thing? What adversary have you prayed for – for good, not bad things to happen? What kind of fruit is your life producing? When have you turned the other cheek when you wanted to punch someone in his cheek? When have you forgiven someone who didn't deserve or ask for it? Who do you need to stop judging? When have you truly trusted God? What is stopping you?