



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Watertown, WI

“Just Say the Word”

Rev. David K. Groth

“When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, ‘I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel’” (Luke 7:9).

Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 2, 2013

Collect of the Day

O God by Your almighty Word You set in order all things in heaven and on earth. Put away from us all things hurtful, and give us those things that are beneficial for us; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

When we hear that Jesus is amazed by something, it should probably make us sit up and pay attention. The word here (*“thaumazo”*), which means to be amazed, typically describes people’s reaction to Jesus. When Jesus calmed the storm, the disciples were amazed that even the wind and the waves obey him (Mt. 8:27). Similarly, in Matthew 15, the crowd was amazed when they saw “the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing” (Mt. 15:31). But here, it’s not the people who are amazed. It’s Jesus, and that happens just twice in the Bible. Once Jesus was amazed by the people of Nazareth . . . by their lack of faith. The only other time he is amazed is right here, by the strong and insightful faith of this centurion. It’s pretty clear God’s Word wants us to take a good close look at this centurion and ask, “What is it about the faith of this man that Jesus found amazing?” First, what do we know about him?

First off, he’s a centurion, which means he commands 100 Roman soldiers. The centurions were known as the finest of the Roman army. Various centurions are mentioned in the Bible, and in every instance, the reference is a favorable one.

Second, he’s not Jewish, so no one there would have expected such great faith coming out of a non-Jew.

Third, he owns a slave, which 2000 years ago was very common and accepted practice. Slaves were owned lock, stock and barrow. They had no rights or privileges, no legal recourse. Any manner of abuse was tolerated under civil law, and so abuse was common and expected. Aristotle wrote, “A slave is a living tool, just as a tool is

an inanimate slave.” That is, slaves were normally treated as things, not as people.

But this centurion is different. He cares deeply for the welfare of this man who is sick. In fact, this doesn't come through in the English, but when the centurion speaks of the man he does not use the word “*doulos*” which is slave. He uses the word “*pais*”, which can mean either servant or child. Isn't that an interesting possibility. “Just say the word and my slave, who I think of as my own child, will be healed.”

Also, we know this centurion has never listened to Jesus preach or teach or seen him heal anyone. Luke says he only “heard about Jesus”. Again, you wouldn't think great faith would come from that, from word of mouth, from bits and pieces of the message without really knowing Jesus. You wouldn't think it would be enough. But obviously, the Holy Spirit was able to use those bits and pieces and ignite the fire of faith in this man.

From the elders, we learn more about the centurion. The Jews speak very highly of him which is very unusual. Remember, the centurion is a Roman, a foreign soldier occupying Jewish land. Normally, he would have been viewed as the enemy. And yet here the Jewish elders are trying to persuade Jesus to heal the man because, quote, “He loves our nation, and he built us our synagogue.” So we know the centurion is extraordinarily generous.

By the way, archaeologists have discovered the ruins of a white marble synagogue in Capernaum which was built around this time. It just might be the one underwritten by this centurion. In any case, the people of Capernaum have noticed the generosity and kindness of this centurion, and so they tell Jesus, “This man is worthy to have you do this for him.”

It's nice that they're lobbying for the centurion, but notice how they use the word “worthy”. Because he has done these things, he is worthy of your help. In other words, you do good works and God should

reward you. You deserve it. You've earned it.

We've always presumed to have a pretty good idea of who deserves what from God. Good people deserve to be blessed and the wicked, well they don't necessarily need to be cursed, but they sure don't need to be blessed either. But this man, "He is worthy of your help" they say. Their intentions are good, but see how they are trying to manipulate Jesus?

Martin Luther had an expression that whenever we try to manipulate God we are "waxing God's nose" he said. In the Middle Ages, wax was often used to make sculptures. It was cheap and, unlike stone, if you made a mistake with wax, you could correct it. It's malleable. You can manipulate it. And when we try to make God do what we think he should do, Luther was saying it's like shaping and changing the nose of a sculpture. Waxing God's nose. Pinching here. Pulling there. That's what the elders were doing 2,000 years ago, and we do that all the time too. When bad things happen to good people, (a tornado levels a grade school in Oklahoma), when bad things happen to good people we think, "Lord they didn't deserve that; you really need to fix it somehow." This centurion "is worthy of your help" the elders say. "Waxing God's nose."

So Jesus sets off for Capernaum, not out of some sense of obligation. (No one can put a guilt trip on Jesus.) It's out of love and compassion and grace that he goes to Capernaum.

On the way, Jesus is intercepted by some friends of the centurion who deliver a message from him. "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof."

Notice how the *centurion* uses the word "worthy." The elders said "he is worthy of your help." The centurion says, "I am not worthy. . ." The elders point to what he has done, but the centurion doesn't point to anything . . . not the spanking new synagogue; not the little insignia on his garment that distinguishes him as a centurion; not his love for Israel or his care

and concern for his servant. Instead, he respectfully requests that Jesus keep his distance. Why? It's not that he's known for being evil; Luke goes out of his way to emphasize the man's goodness and generosity. But no one knows your own sin better than you do, right, and so we can all think of ourselves as Paul did, as "Chief of sinners". Therefore, please God, don't come any closer. I'm not worthy. It's like Adam and Eve, in their guilt, trying to hide from God. It's like Isaiah's cry after having been given a vision of God's holiness: "Woe is me. I am a man of unclean lips living amidst a people of unclean lips." It's like the psalmist writing, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?" And it's like Peter, "Stay away, Lord, for I am a sinful man." And it's like you and me, when we're feeling most like a sinner we want to keep God at arm's length. Just when we should be running to Him for his mercy and grace, in reality, we run from him, trying to not think about God, nor pray to him, nor seek his forgiveness.

"I am not worthy to have you come under my roof" he says. "Therefore I did not presume to come to you. Just say the word, and my servant will be healed." Somehow, the centurion recognizes the holiness and the authority of Jesus. A personal visit isn't required. Just say the word, even from a distance, and my "my servant will be healed."

That's what amazes Jesus about the faith of this centurion. This centurion had great faith in the authority of the word of Jesus. He feels no need of an outward sign, such as a touch or even the sound of a voice. He needed no contact with the fringe of the garment of Jesus. No healing ointments. No hocus pocus. No loud and dramatic interventions. The centurion knew that just a few quiet words from the mouth of Jesus would be enough, even if they are spoken from a distance. He has this wonderful, surprising faith that expects miracles and trusts in the authority of God's Word to make them happen. Somehow he knows the same authoritative word that spoke the creation into existence ("let there be light") is the word at work whenever Jesus speaks.

The centurion is aware of how authority works. He's a soldier and looks upon the world through the soldier's eye.

He's been trained to follow orders without delay and without having to know why they were given. And he in turn expects the same obedience from those under him. "I tell this one go, and he goes." If **he** the centurion receives willing obedience from those under his authority, how much more the Son of God will receive willing obedience even from a disease. He had heard of Jesus, and from that he believed Jesus had this kind of authority. No disease can resist that authority. "Just say the word, and my servant will be healed." When Jesus hears this, he is amazed. He turns to the crowd, a crowd consisting mostly of God's ancient people, and says he has not found such great faith in all Israel. In other words, even where Jesus can expect great faith, because of all that long history between God and his people Israel, even where great faith should be the norm because they have the Old Testament Word of God in their possession, yet the Lord hasn't seen such great faith until he comes across this Gentile, this Roman, this soldier. He only had bits and pieces of the message. "He had heard of Jesus". Surely he had a lot of holes in his faith, unanswered questions, tensions . . . but he didn't allow them to wreck his faith. "Just say the word" he says, "and my servant will be healed."

You know how it ends. Verse 10, "And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well."

We started out by noticing that Jesus if Jesus is amazed by something, we should probably perk up and pay attention. What can we learn from the centurion's faith?

First, he was a humble man. Though others spoke very highly of him, yet of himself he said, "I am not worthy to have you come under my roof." Though others thought he deserved special treatment, he himself wasn't making any claims on the basis of his good works. Though he is a good man compared to others, he knows he's a sinner compared to God. He knows God doesn't owe him anything.

We can learn from that humble spirit. None of us deserves any favors from Jesus. What we deserve is his present and eternal punishment. But we receive from him is his love and grace. He takes care of us, even going so far as to die on a cross for the forgiveness of our sins. How can we say we're worthy of any of that? All we can say is thank you, Lord. Anything good coming our way is all gift, 100 percent grace.

Moreover, from this centurion we can learn to have that same confidence in God's Word. Perhaps like him, you feel as if your faith is running on bits and pieces, like you have only heard of Jesus, rather than really knowing him. Perhaps there are holes in your faith, mysteries, tensions, unanswered questions. And perhaps in the church, even in this congregation, you feel like an outsider, like a foreigner in a foreign land . . . that, try as you might, you don't quite fit into this cultural context. The centurion had all that and more working against him, and yet he did not let any of it trip him up. He did not let it wreck his faith. Don't you let that happen either. Cling to God's Word. It is sufficient. It makes us wise unto salvation. It's all we have and it's all we need. Learn from the centurion. Don't dwell on the doubts and the questions. Don't make them bigger than they are. The centurion held on to what he knew, and he knew Jesus had the authority to save.

"Just say the word . . ." Just say the word, Lord, and there will be light. Just say the word and there will be healing. Just say the word, and our faith will be strengthened. Say the word, and that ordinary water will be a life-giving water, rich in grace. Just say the word, and this bread and wine will be your holy body and blood for our forgiveness. Just say the word, even from a distance, and in the twinkling of the eye, the dead will rise, and the old will become new, and the mortal will take on immortality.

Lord, just say the word. Amen.

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