

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 29, 2016
Pentecost 2
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

I Kings 8:22-23, 27-30, 41-43
Psalm 96
Galatians 1:1-10
Luke 7:1-10

Near the end of John's Gospel, John says that to write and record all that Jesus said and did would be impossible, so he has to be very selective in what he writes.

This is true of all of the Gospel writers. They cannot tell the *whole* story in terms of the quantity of materials, so they must be selective and tell the story from their own point of view.

Two weeks ago we celebrated Pentecost. If I asked each of you to summarize that day in a paragraph of 25 words or less, each of you would do that differently. Some of you would emphasize the good food we enjoyed after the service. Others would record elements of the worship service. But each of you would be *selective*, and you would write about that day from your own perspective, and with your own agenda.

That's sort of what the Gospel writers are doing. They are telling the entire story of Jesus' life and ministry without telling the entire story. They cannot include everything.

One of the best questions we can ask of a Gospel story as we seek to understand it, then, is: *Why did the writer include this story? What is it about this story today that makes it important enough to make it into Luke's final draft?*

In the case of our story today, it seems an especially fruitful question. As we seek to answer this question, we must look a bit more closely at the story itself.

On the surface, it would appear that this story is meant to teach us about the nature of faith. If someone asks the question, "What is faith?" We could turn to this story and say, "read this story, and your question will be answered."

A Roman officer has a slave that is on his deathbed. He hears about Jesus, and asks for Jesus to come and heal his servant. When Jesus agrees, the Centurion sends word to Jesus and says: "Don't go to the trouble of coming to my house. Just say the word from where you are, and I know my servant will be healed."

When Jesus hears this message, the text tells us that he was "amazed." Another version renders it, "Jesus marveled." Eugene Peterson translates it like this: "taken aback, Jesus said: 'I've yet to come across this kind of simple trust anywhere in Israel'..."

So, indeed, this seems to be a story about the *nature* of faith. But is that the reason Luke has included it? Is the purpose of this story merely to show us what faith looks like? Or does Luke have more in mind?

If Jesus was amazed and taken aback at this Roman soldier's faith, how would the people to whom Luke writes understand and respond to it? By the time they read and hear Luke's account of this story, at least 40-50 years have passed. How would they view this man and his actions?

We don't know for sure. But one thing we do know: In that 40-50 years of elapsed time, Rome was still occupying and dominating Israel. The *Pax Romana* was still in force. Rome was still enforcing its will upon Israelites of all ranks and stations. A Roman who had a slave could literally do anything he wanted to that slave.

What this means is that this man who seeks Jesus' help for his servant is *one of the persons directly responsible for Israel's oppression*. He is a Roman, a Gentile, a pagan. He is a big part of the problem if you are an Israelite.

And yet Jesus is "taken aback" by this man's faith. And what makes me sit up and really take notice here is that Jesus commends this man's faith, but we have no evidence in the text that this man becomes a follower of Jesus. He does not ask to follow Jesus. He does not confess him as the Messiah. He does not even seem all that interested in meeting Jesus. He simply sees in Jesus an authority that he recognizes, and that he needs. Maybe he becomes a disciple – maybe not. Neither Jesus nor Luke seems particularly concerned. Jesus simply praises his astounding faith, and Luke records it.

We have now reached the place in the sermon where I'm going to stop preaching and go to meddlin', as the old timers used to say.

Let me ask you a question this morning: Do you have a family member, a loved one, a friend, or someone you know who doesn't go to church?

Do you know someone who isn't particularly strong in their faith, or who isn't a Christian at all?

Do you know or love someone whose relationship to the church is marginal and sketchy at best?

Let me ask a follow-up question: *Is it possible that God's will and God's work in the world extends far beyond the confines of our church, or even our brand of faith? Is it possible that God works through and uses people whom we have "written off?" Is it possible that God uses and works through people who are not of our denomination or doctrinal position?*

Is it possible for God to use and work through people of other religions?

Is it possible for God to use and work through atheists and unbelievers?

I don't believe the reason Luke includes this story is to give us a dictionary definition of great faith. I believe the reason Luke includes this story is to show us that **God's grace and power often is manifested in the most unlikely of people, and in the most unexpected of circumstances.**

The God who showed up in a man crucified on a cross often shows up in people and places we don't expect God to be, shouting: *Surprise!* That, I believe, is why Luke tells this story.

Before we come to the Lord's Table this morning, we're going to do something a little different. I'm going to ask you to bow your heads while I pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon us. Give us grace Not to be shocked and surprised when You use people whom we have written off. Forgive us for our pride that leads us to believe that You cannot be at work in those who are different from us. Forgive us for our unwillingness to see You in the faces of those not like us. Give us grace to see those who are vastly different from us, but who are known and loved by You, and who may be doing your will even though they would not call it that or name it that way. May our faith be commendable in your sight, and may the grace we receive at your table this day not be in vain.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.