

## **Faith from the Fringe**

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

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This story is our starting place for a detailed exploration of the Gospel of Luke. We are going to be mostly in Luke from now until Advent. We may take a detour or two along the way, but I would encourage you to concentrate some part of your own Bible study on this Gospel for a while. The fact that we can spend so much time here is an indicator of the richness of this Gospel, and of the depths we can plumb without ever getting to the bottom.

Some Bible scholars say that if they could only have one book of the Bible as the basis for the whole story, it would be Luke's Gospel. This book and the Book of Acts constitute a two-volume set, giving the account of the life and ministry of Jesus and then the beginnings of the Church. Luke is identified as "the beloved physician" in Acts, and then is described as a fellow worker and traveler with Paul. The texts of the Gospel and the Book of Acts are based on Luke's independent research and study. For scholars in Greek literature, this is said to be one of the finest examples of great writing of its time. For us, 2000 years later, it is a treasure trove of lessons and learnings.

We begin this journey with Luke in a story that we will find to be typical of a lot of the stories and teaching in Luke. This story challenged those who experienced it first-hand, it contains important lessons about the very nature of the Gospel, it demonstrates a fundamental point about the ministry of Jesus, and it carries meaning for us as we seek to live as people of the Gospel.

This story takes place in the town of Capernaum, about 80-90 miles from Jerusalem on the northwestern corner of the Sea of Galilee. Capernaum can be thought of as the geographic center of most of the time of Jesus' ministry, which itself was a challenge to the traditional expectations of the Jewish people of the day, who were looking for a Messiah to establish His kingdom in Jerusalem. The story of Jesus in Jerusalem will come in its due time. For now, though, Jesus has things to do among the people who are not at the center of power, either by position or location.

The person we learn the most about in this short story is the Roman centurion. This was an unusual man.

A centurion was in charge of about one hundred Roman soldiers, and position of some importance, the equivalent of a higher-level sergeant in our modern military. Our son James is a Sergeant in the Marine Corps, and he would say that the Marine Corps is really run by the sergeants and corporals, but they let the officers think they are in charge. The centurion would have been highly valuable in the Roman army – responsible enough to be entrusted with 100 soldiers under his command and responsive to the direction of his superiors. Successful officers know how to work effectively with that kind of person, because they know how to get things done.

This centurion's responsibility would have been to maintain order on behalf of the Roman Empire in this part of occupied Palestine. The general Roman approach to the religions of their occupied territories was pretty cynical – for the most part, they let the people continue to worship as they chose as long as they did not challenge the authority of the Romans in civil affairs. This centurion, however, went well beyond simply tolerating the religion of the people. He actively supported them, and had earned the respect of the people to the extent that when the centurion asked the local Jewish elders to speak to Jesus for him, they gladly did so. He also demonstrated respect for their religion, recognizing that it would have made Jesus ceremonially unclean to enter the house of a Gentile – so he had his messengers say, “Please just heal my servant from where you are.”

We also see that this centurion had an exceptional degree of compassion for his servant. The servants or slaves of a Roman centurion would have legally been nothing more than property, to be treated or mistreated in whatever way the owner saw fit. This centurion was willing to call in some favors and risk being thought of as weak by his own people in seeking healing for this servant.

We might look at these things we learn about the character of this centurion, and easily describe him as a good man. But what demonstrates the faith that Jesus named as so impressive is the clear recognition in the centurion that Jesus held the authority of

God. That was an insight that not even the disciples were all getting at this early point in Jesus' ministry. It is an insight that, as we talked about last week, not all people who name themselves as Christians get even today. The Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is a very basic, essential and fundamental block in the foundation of our faith in the Triune God: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. The centurion got it.

The extension of God's grace to this Roman centurion – a Gentile – challenged Jewish orthodoxy. They had forgotten the lessons of the prophets – of Elijah healing the son of a Phoenician widow and Elisha healing the Syrian general Naaman. When Jesus reminded the people of these stories in his very first sermon, the people of His home synagogue in Nazareth were so enraged that they tried to throw Him off a cliff. In this event, the extension of God's grace to a Gentile becomes more than a historical footnote – it becomes real in their presence.

The lessons that we have to learn from this story may be so obvious that we pass over them without giving them more than casual thought. But this is important stuff. Let's make sure we get this.

1. God is acting in His world in times and places that we might not expect. We look for God in certain times and places, and we find ourselves surprised when God acts somewhere else. In this backwater town of Capernaum, God delivers a powerful message about the reach of His grace beyond the boundaries that the religious establishment had drawn. Where do we expect to see God at work? When have we been surprised to see God at work somewhere else?
2. God is acting in and through people that we might not expect. A Roman centurion, even one so highly respected by the local population as this one, was not a person that people would have thought Jesus would see such faith in. We may be wearing the same blinders – blinders that keep us from seeing people of faith, blinders that keep us from recognizing children of God who are not like us. People who do not look like us or dress like us or talk like us or worship like us or have our same history may, in spite of our pre-conceptions, have a depth and beauty of faith that would turn

Jesus' head. God's grace is not limited to people like us, and neither should our mission to make disciples be limited to people like us.

3. The reality of God's grace is brought home to us through faith. The centurion believed in the authority and power and ultimately the divinity of Jesus. He knew that the power to heal was God's – and Jesus held that power as God Incarnate – and the centurion acted on that faith. That is the faith that all of Scripture works together to tell us is the faith that is the foundation of right relationship with God – the foundation of our salvation. Living faith in God's love and mercy and forgiveness and grace will make us whole.

We will hear all these lessons again, as we have heard them before. The repetition does not diminish them, and we should not allow their familiarity to allow them to grow stale. God is moving in this world – in this nation, in this county, in this fellowship, and is moving in ways that we will not see or experience if we are unwilling to see and believe that God lives outside of our boundaries – to see and believe that God reveals Himself in fresh new ways every day, that God uses unexpected people and unexpected ways to achieve His purposes, that faith in God makes itself real wherever and whenever we open ourselves up to it.

Make the faith of the centurion yours, and be amazed by what God will do.

Amen.