

June 2 2013

Scripture Lesson ~ *I Kings 8:22-23, 41-43*

*Luke 7:1-10*

Sermon      *Faith Where You Least Expect It*

**One day a man named Joe was driving down a city street in his tractor trailer. And he saw a group of people he would have that at that time called lazy bums standing on the sidewalk. These homeless guys were waiting outside a shelter for dinner to be served, and Joe yelled out the window, “Hey bums go get a job”. And then he drove back to the new house he was building and forgot all about them, at least for a while. A few months later a bad mechanic ruined the motor in Joe’s truck, Joe needed the truck for his work and without it he soon lost his job, and then that new house he was building as well. Things went downhill until he found himself living on the streets, standing outside that same city shelter. But of course he wanted nothing more than to get another chance, he wanted nothing more than to return to work. One evening another man drove by in his brand new sedan, and he saw Joe standing outside with those lazy bums near the shelter. And that man also yelled out his window ~ “Hey bums go get a job”. And later on when Joe was interviewed about the situation, he said “I felt awful, but I guess I had that coming”. In his prosperous days Joe distanced himself from the homeless with what I would call an invisible boundary between himself and them. It was a boundary based on harsh judgments and self-rightness, and it was not until Joe actually joined the ranks of those same folks, that this invisible boundary was completely and utterly destroyed.**

**And you and I are often not that much better or that much different, from Joe in this business of setting up invisible moral boundaries. Human nature too often encourages the thinking of us and them. We may even seek security in the belief that we are better than other people, and that measure up what others are lacking in God’s sight. It is really easy to condemn those that are unemployed, or somebody that has been in prison, for whatever reason we don’t know, and those that live life just a little bit differently than we might live. Often we judge with arrogance until we gain insight through personal experiences with other people, like the experiences that Joe had. Through the eyes of Dr. Luke who was a great physician and the writer of today’s gospel lesson, we see Jesus as a person who is very concerned about the health of such people, about their physical health, about their emotional health, their spiritual health. And a result, no doubt, of his own experiences,**

**Luke portrayed Jesus as a Savior, a Savior who sympathizes and empathizes with empathy with the ones that are the very ones who are least and last and lost and down, locked in and locked out of the society around us. Like those so called bums, standing in front of the city shelter that day.**

**This text takes a little bit of a different twist, as it uncovers a rare type of faith found in such an unlikely outsider as that Roman Centurion as we heard about in today's gospel lesson. A little bit of background, the Roman Army was built upon manageable units of 100 men each. Each unit was led by what was called a Centurion whose portfolio required military experience and also civilian skills. In the text there was a single Centurion, we never get his name, who had a servant who was at the point of death. St. Luke's account of the event, in fact states that the Centurion deeply loved his servant, which was not the common thing in those days. The Centurion's servant probably held a very special place in his family circle and was not considered to be a pet, as might have been in those days in many situations, but in fact was someone who was very dear to that person. Although the servant was Jewish which apparently posed no problem for the Centurion, which was also a rare stance for that day and that time. And in addition, this Centurion was highly regarded by the local population which too was a rarity, an overlord that was accepted by his subjected people.**

**It was reported to Jesus that the Centurion had built the local synagogue of the Jewish people and his motives could be called into question at that point. Did he erect that building as sort of a program known as the Pax Romana, the Peace of Rome? After all, Julius Caesar did encourage his soldiers to tolerate local religions for the purpose of retaining peace throughout the realm. Or did he construct this worship center because he was a true believer? It appears that St. Luke did believe that the latter was in fact the case, that the Centurion what was called a rightest man, not a Jewish member but perhaps a person who worshiped at the synagogue. And furthermore Jesus stated that the Centurion and this is the strange part, that the Centurion exhibited a type of faith he had not encountered anywhere including amongst his own people of Israel.**

**What in the world does Jesus mean by this statement? When Jesus was asked by the Centurion to come and heal his servant, he went and that demonstrates in Jesus' eyes a true faith in God is far more important than our nationality or our social status or our economic level. When he was not far from the home, Jesus was meant by some of the Centurion's friends they never do meet face to face, who told him he shouldn't even enter the house because the Centurion felt completely unworthy to have such a one within his home. Was it because Jews and Gentiles fraternize under each other's roofs**

or was it because as a believer or in fact a convert to Judaism a sense of unworthiness in Jesus presence overwhelmed him so much he did not want to even be in Jesus presence? In this case it seems to be the second reason for often I think a convert or one new to a faith will uphold the belief and follow its mandates a lot more readily even more than those of us born into that faith. How many of us who were sort of born into Christianity sometimes take God for granted? Sometimes demonstrate little faith? Sometimes are put to shame by those from whom little is expected like that very Centurion.

A story sort of illustrates this point, a Pastor friend of mine tells about the time when the Pastor he assisted as a Seminary student asked if he could audit some courses taught on the hill, which their Seminary was known as. The background story was the Pastor had very little opportunity to gain this kind of experience in his life and so the request was granted, but right after that request was granted, heavy snow storms blanketed the whole area and stopped public transportation and other services. My friend and some of his other classmates decided to skip the classes on a snow day and go down the hill for what they called an unscheduled coffee break. But as they arrived at the school gate in one student's ancient automobile met that same Pastor who had walked several miles through the snow from the other side of town. And it goes without saying he not only shamed those who were more privileged than he was, but he also taught them a lesson that those students would never forget about dedication.

This Roman Centurion sent the message to Jesus that he didn't have to come inside of his house, that Jesus could just speak the words and his servant would be healed. Such a faith perhaps caught Jesus off balance because he used this as a point of those all around him "Just speak the words", said the Centurion, 'the servant will be healed. Those of us who feel that we know by our ability to carry on a conversation could learn something from this passage. Because this is not permission to do a lot of unwarranted talking in our faith, instead we are shown in this story that there is power in just a very few words.

A little final story, a very sick member of one of my former congregations who was in isolation upon learning he could not have visitors spoke these words to me. Pastor, tell the church I regret my friends can't see me, but tell them to keep those prayers rolling as prayers can go where they cannot go. Just speak the word said the Centurion, and my servant will be made whole.

I think the next time we are walking or driving in Spokane maybe around one of those soup kitchens this passage encourages us to think about that Centurion, an outcast, that person that could have been despised by

**those around him. A person of a different race, a person sent to a hostile place, he was never the less attracted to that religion of the conquered people and came to know one who not only spoke the word but gave the Centurion, I think, a new meaning, a new sense of purpose in life, which inspired in him faith, where all of us would least expect that faith to be. And together we say AMEN.**