

Faith

Luke 7:1-10

2nd Sunday after Pentecost -May 29, 2016
The Rev. Dr. Ritva H. Williams

[SLIDE 22] “Not even in Israel have I found such faith.” With these words, Jesus commends a pagan military officer. Yes, that’s right — Jesus praises not just a foreign military officer but a pagan military officer for being a man of faith. This is one of those incidents in the ministry of Jesus that leaves us scratching our heads wondering how can a foreigner who worships a totally different set of gods be praised for having faith? Which leads us to the question of what is faith anyway? And more specifically, what does Jesus mean when he praises the centurion for his faith? It should be obvious that Jesus is **not** saying that this man is an upstanding example of Israelite religion.



When I asked folks at Wednesday evening worship to define the word faith, many referred to the verse from Hebrews 11:1 — “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” When I asked the same question of the group that gathered on Thursday for devotions at Prairie Hills Senior Living Center, the very first answer was “trust in God.” Yes, faith is about trust in God, and it is the foundation of our hope for things that we cannot yet see. But I’m not sure that these definitions really help us understand all that Jesus is saying about this foreign centurion who, after all, doesn’t worship the God of Israel.

As one seminary professor puts it, faith is a hard concept to understand because faith is about the stuff in life that you can’t measure with a dipstick, test with a thermometer, or see through a microscope. Why? Because faith is about who you are and who God is.¹ In other words, faith is a quality, a characteristic, a trait of persons, both human and divine. It is a character trait that is manifested in how persons relate to one another. Other words that we use to describe this character trait are loyalty, commitment, and solidarity. A faithful person is loyal, committed and stands in solidarity with us. A faithful person is someone we can trust, someone we can rely on. A faithful person can be depended on to carry out their responsibilities. A faithful person will keep their promises.



[STEP 1] The centurion turns out to be such a person. We see the faith of the centurion in the way that he relates to the people in his life. In a world where slaves were often regarded as little more than talking tools who were thrown out when they could no longer work, this centurion values his slave, indeed the slave is precious to him. In a world where slaveowners were not obligated to provide medical care, this centurion

¹ Rolf Jacobson, “Faith” in *Crazy Talk: A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Theological Terms*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2008: 66.

goes to considerable trouble to find a healer for his slave. In a world where a Roman centurion's job was ensure that Caesar got his share of all that was grown and produced in the provinces, this centurion uses his own resources to build a synagogue — a house of prayer — for people who belong to a different religion. In a world where a military commander could have just ordered Jesus brought to him and demanded a healing, this centurion sends first a delegation of Jewish elders — the leading citizens of Capernaum — to ask Jesus to come and heal his slave, and to provide a character reference. The centurion does not presume that his position gives him a right to demand services from the local healer. He even sends his friends to tell Jesus that he — a Roman centurion — is not worthy to have Jesus enter his house. The Roman centurion recognizes Jesus to be a person of authority, who has the power to command the evil spirits that cause illness. So even though they are of different nationalities and different religions the centurion treats Jesus with respect and honor, trusting that not only can Jesus heal his slave but that Jesus will, indeed, heal him. And Jesus is amazed and marvels at the faith of the centurion, saying, “not even in Israel have I found such faith.”

I wonder if anyone in the crowd of Israelites who followed Jesus, said, “Ouch!” I wonder if anyone in the crowd of Israelites who followed Jesus that day was offended and turned away from Jesus, thinking Jesus must be crazy to think a Roman centurion had faith of a quality and quantity not found among God's holy people. **[STEP 2]**

[STEP 3] How many of us here this morning know and love people who don't go to church, whose relationship with the church is sketchy at best, who are not strongly committed to being religious or spiritual, who are not Christians at all? [Show of hands]. I grew up in a family that one of my mentors described as hatch'em-match'em-dispatch'em Christians. We went to church for baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals. I have a daughter in ministry, and two sons who are hatch'em-match'em-dispatch'em churchgoers. My brother in the military shows has a deeper faith than my brother in business who at best can be described as agnostic about religion. How many of you know and love folks like that? Maybe some of you are persons like that.



Maybe some of you are persons who are struggling with the idea of religion. Maybe some of you have a hard time believing some of the things in the Bible or what you've been told about Christianity. Maybe some of you aren't really sure about what you believe. Maybe some of you think you're not good enough, that you're not worthy of Christ's love.

So what if Jesus is trying to tell us that these persons — that you — are also beloved of God, that God is using them and you to do good things, that these persons, that you are capable of demonstrating faith that Jesus finds praiseworthy?²

Let's think about that for a moment. The Bible teaches us that God made humankind in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:27). All humans of every race and ethnicity, all humans of every religion and even no religion, all humans of every gender and sexual orientation, all humans of every size and shape and ability — all humans without exception — are created in the image and likeness of God. That means that all humans share some essential quality or trait that comes from God. The Bible teaches us that God is merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6-7). One of the essential characteristics of God is faithfulness — loyalty, commitment, solidarity, trustworthiness, reliability, dependability. Why should it surprise us then, when persons whom society has taught us to think of as “other,” as “foreigners,” as “aliens,” as somehow unworthy of our attention or care demonstrate these traits? Perhaps we should look again at these persons through the lens of faithfulness. We might learn something.

Please pray with me:

O Holy One, you come in unexpected ways as the underdog, the one who doesn't need approval, and the kind enemy. We do not see others as you see them. Today we humbly ask that you to help us see the world more like you do. Help us understand your definition of “faithful” no matter how different it may be from our own. **Amen.**

² David Lose, “Unexpected Faith” at <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2592>