

May 30, 2021

Lessons in Luke:

Faith

Luke 7:1-10

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[Video]

(first person) "I volunteer with an organization called "Friends of Green Street Park. They are an all-volunteer run neighborhood organization, working to revitalize a park in the city's poorest neighborhood. I volunteer with this organization because I like giving back. My name is ___ and I am a"

(second person) "I am a teacher, a speaker, I'm a retreat leader, and I'm a spiritual companion. My name is ___ and I am a"

So, how did you think they were going to finish that last sentence? What identity do you think was about to follow their passion that they're pursuing or their mission they're building their lives around? Let's find out:

[Second part of the video: "...I am a secular humanist." "...I am a Soto Zen Buddhist monk."]

It almost sounds like the beginning of a good joke, "A Muslim, an atheist, and a Buddhist walk into a church..." These are people from other faiths and no faith. They don't follow Jesus, and yet, I think they have a lot to teach Jesus followers – you and me – about what discipleship looks like.

Our reading for today centers on just such a person, a Roman centurion. The story goes like this: A beloved servant of this Roman centurion becomes sick. Well, the centurion had heard about Jesus, so he sent some highly respected Jewish elders to Jesus for help. An interesting note about the relationship between the elders and the centurion was that it was a good one, it wasn't antagonistic. They apparently got along so well that the centurion paid for their synagogue. Well, these elders get to Jesus and they begin to beg Jesus to heal the servant.

Jesus had compassion and so he begins to go back with the elders to the servant, but as they are on their way, they run into servants of the centurion who say to Jesus, speaking on behalf of the centurion, "*Lord, don't trouble yourself by coming to my house. I'm not worthy to even meet you. Just say the word and my servant*

will be healed." Jesus turned to everyone present and commented, "*I haven't seen faith like this anywhere, not even in Israel."*

Did you hear that...what Jesus said? "*I haven't seen faith like this anywhere...not even in Israel."*

Today I want to be, maybe, a bit provocative and say that perhaps there are some modern day centurions that can teach us a thing or two about how to follow Jesus. I know that for some of you are probably like, "well, yeah." In any case, my hope for today is that you leave here with at least a few handles or practices that the centurion embodies in our story for today: Curiosity, Humility, and Faithfulness.

Get Curious

The Romans, of which the centurion was one, were pagans. They knew a lot about a lot of religions and this particular centurion pagan was paying attention well enough to the faiths of the day to know about an obscure Jewish Rabbi in Jesus. At some point he had to be standing around one day on his shift and say, "Hey, who's that guy?" When was the last time we got genuinely curious about another Christian denomination... let alone another religion? I think that one of the unfortunate by-products of the last few hundred years of Christians living in increasingly diverse religious landscapes is that we've engaged in a bit of what I like to call Curiosity Abstinence. I'm not going to take this analogy too far, but I can remember when I was a kid it was almost a sign of pride in my youth group if you were able to avoid being defiled by the Catholics and their Pope or the Baptists you went to school with.

One other story that I always chuckle about was maybe two years ago; my family was hanging out with another family on our street who had a boy the same age as our older boy, Emil. It was right before Halloween and the kids were trying on their costumes. And I remember Emil was wearing his lab coat, and I don't know why but he felt the need to declare, "I'm a scientist!" To which the other boy responded, "I'm a Christian!"

His family was actively suppressing and blocking access to faiths and information that might challenge his faith. What about you? When was the last time you Googled the ideas of another faith? When was the last time you kept your mouth shut about the four spiritual laws long enough to hear something about the pillars of Islam or how evolution works? When was the last time you were curious like this centurion?

Get Humble

One of the interesting twists that Christianity has taken

in America is that it has become deeply masculine. It isn't uncommon for me to see pictures of Jesus with rippling muscles pulling apart the cross or giving the devil a right hook. There is a whole song book of Christian music that could pass for a slow-jam introduction to a WWE smackdown for Jesus. But then there is an ocean of Christ-splaining—it's like man-splaining—but for Jesus-y things in our culture. If you don't know what mansplaining is, ask your wife, and if you want to know what Christ-splaining is, think of the last time a fellow Christian gave you a bemused "isn't that sweet" kind of look when you disagreed or questioned some idea and then explained why you're wrong. Christ-splaining.

This centurion was in charge of 100 soldiers and yet he humbled himself before Jesus who again, at the time, was just an obscure Jewish rabbi. This was pre-resurrection. What does Jesus say about following him again? *"Take up your cross... if you want to gain your life, you must lose it."* The centurion is doing that! He is practicing Christ-like humility; and friends, I think we've got to do the same.

Humility in the Bible is a powerful concept. It means to "empty one's self." So, this centurion who has tons of power in the society, he has position, he has rank, let's go of all of that. He become just another person in need of help. He lets go of the rope of his power. And, it's important for us, because as Christians in America we have been more or less the power players in culture since the beginning. We've decided who was a person, who would be slaves, who could have babies, who could get married, who could be a boss at work—all kinds of things. I know nowadays it doesn't always feel like we have power as Christians, but to many people out there, it sure looks like we do. So it is important that you know this power exists. And second that we've got to leave it at the door when we connect with people who do not share our faith because so long as they feel as though we are just trying to get something from them, or coerce them into being the way we want them to be, we won't be meeting, we won't be connecting. We'll be putting ourselves on a pedestal—separate from them, unable to do what our mission as a congregation calls us to do, to connect. We've got to get humble. And finally, we've got to get faithful.

Get Faithful

There are some of you who are probably about to hit stop on this sermon because it sounds like a bunch of religious syncretism or post-modern theological wishy washiness. Respectfully, see steps one and two. More seriously, though, that couldn't be further from the truth of where I'm going with this. This Roman centurion, as I mentioned, was a pagan. Now, we use that term today

to mean something like an atheist or unbeliever. Well, 2,000 years ago, to be an atheist would have been next to impossible, because everyone believed in a god, especially pagans, and pagan people believed in more than one god—earnestly.

The centurion says something that I think is easy to forget, but is monumentally important for us as followers of Jesus. He tells his servants to tell Jesus, "Just say the word."

Think about that. "Just say the word." That is what provokes Jesus to make the comment about the lack of faith in Israel. The centurion believes earnestly that Jesus can heal his servant.

In the same way the people we met at the beginning of the sermon believe earnestly in their faith or philosophy. It is theirs. They are staking their lives on it. I wonder about us sometimes. This story is so interesting because the Jewish leaders that the centurion had met go to Jesus and beg him to heal the servant as if Jesus might not be able to or might not be willing to do it. The centurion doesn't do any of that. He just says, "Say the word."

The reality friends is that we live in a culture that in spite of our influence is not predominately Christian anymore and yeah, I too often have anxiety about that, but at the same time I keep running into people like the ones we met who have existed in this same space that we are entering forever but who have maintained their faith. It begs the question: Why does the pluralism in our culture have to be so anxiety producing for my faith? What if I took a lesson from these people and really, truly believed, staked my life on nothing less—in my case—than Jesus' love and righteousness?

Friends, I think that if you do these three things: get curious, stay humble, and get faithful that you'll grow deeper in your faith and more connected in this world than you have ever been. And isn't that what this church is all about? Connection? So, as we close today, I want you to think of someone you need to get some tea with this week. Someone you've kept at arms length so that you can get curious and mix it up with them. Then I want you to think of someone that you have Christ-splained to and grab a coffee with them where you listen and don't talk. Then, I want you to show up here next week, ready to worship our risen Savior, Jesus, our cornerstone.