

“A Most Amazing Faith,” Luke 7:1-10, Pentecost 2-C, May 29, 2016

One day, 225 years ago actually—way back in the **year 1791**, a man was riding his horse in Virginia when he came upon a group of soldiers who were doing their best to move a heavy piece of timber. Off to the side, some 25 feet away from them, was their **commanding officer**—a **corporal** in the United States Army. That corporal was barking out his command to all of soldiers saying: **“Heave! Heave!”** But no matter how hard that group of soldiers **strained against that heavy piece of timber**, it would not budge. So the corporal called out again: **“Heave! Heave!”** But the timber could not be moved.

This is when the man on horseback, who had come upon this group of soldiers unexpectedly, called out to the corporal: **“Why don’t you go over there and help them?”**

The corporal replied, **“Because I am the corporal, that’s why!”**

That’s when the man on the horse, dismounted his horse, went over to that group of soldiers to supply them with the extra **“man-power”** they needed to move that heavy piece of timber—just a few feet actually—to where it was needed! Then the mysterious horseman climbed back upon his horse, looked that corporal in the eye and said: **“Corporal, the next time your men need help, send for the Commander in Chief.”**

That mysterious horseman was none other than **President George Washington!**

Friends, American history reminds us that some of the greatest generals who have served in the U.S. Army were not only brilliant men skilled in the **“Art of War,”** but men who are blessed with real hearts of compassion too. This certainly was true of **“STORMIN-NORMAN.”** General Norman Schwarzkopf led the Allied Forces to victory in the 1991 Persian Gulf War against Iraq, after Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait. **As a man who had to be a really tough man when the circumstance around him called for that, General Schwarzkopf could also be a very tenderhearted and compassionate man when the circumstances around him called for that too!**

And I can’t help but think that this must have also been the disposition of the Roman Centurion whom we meet in our Gospel lesson today. I believe he must have had one of those **mothers** who often said to him what some of your mothers may have said to you when you were growing up: **“You can attract more flies with honey than you can with vinegar!”**

This centurion was a Roman soldier stationed in the city of Capernaum with 100 soldiers under his command. There he lived in that blustering little fishing village in northern Galilee. He was entrusted by Rome to keep the peace—and to maintain law and order there.

But rather than always using brute force and a spirit of intimidation to keep the peace, he obviously showed a lot of respect and attention to the people who were living there; many of them being Jewish people, living underneath his command.

This man was a powerful man who must have also had a tender heart of compassion too. For he is actually the one, who **built the synagogue there in Capernaum for the Jewish people!** And we know that Jesus’ reputation had certainly preceded him there in Capernaum too.

At the outset of our Lord's teaching and healing ministry, he went to that very synagogue in Capernaum that this centurion had paid to have built for the Jewish people living there, where Jesus **taught the Word of God to many, many people.**

St. Mark tells us that the people there were astonished with our Lord's teaching, for he taught them as one who had **"authority"** and not as the scribes (Mark 1:22).

Then following our Lord's sermon, Jesus proceeded to cast out an unclean spirit from one of the men who were sitting there that day. And then **later he goes over to Simon Peter's house, where Peter was living in Capernaum, and cures his mother-in-law**, who was down in the bed with a fever. Jesus heals her so completely that she amazingly enough got up and fried some fish and hushpuppies for her son-in-law Peter, and for Jesus and all his friends who were there.

That evening at sundown when the news was spreading all throughout Capernaum, where Jesus was hanging his hat in those hours, St. Mark tells us that the townspeople *"brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And Jesus healed many who were sick with various diseases"* (Mark 1:32-34).

You know, I can't help but wonder if this Roman centurion may not have been there to listen, at times, to Jesus' sermons and to listen to Jesus calling people to repentance, proclaiming to them that the kingdom of God was at hand?

And yet, isn't it amazing, that even though this man had plenty of **authority** to send a small **cohort of soldiers** to where it was that Jesus was at, and to bring Jesus back to Capernaum by **brute force, if necessary**, he doesn't resort to that kind of tactic at all!

In a far more **"gentlemanly"** manner, this Roman centurion **simply requested** that some of the Jewish elders he had become friends with, might not travel there, to wherever it was that Jesus was at—to invite him to please come back to Capernaum with them that he might heal the Roman centurion's slave who unfortunately was also very ill at this time also. His servant was so sick Luke tells us that he was sick: *"Even to the point of death"* (Luke 7:2).

And there's no indication in the text that this group of Jewish elders, who went to seek out Jesus did so **begrudgingly**. To quite the contrary, once they arrived at the place where Jesus is at—they pleaded with the Lord earnestly saying: *"He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue"* a synagogue in which Jesus had been the guest preacher and healed a few people several times.

Friends there are several key distinctions about this Roman centurion to which we ought to give some close scrutiny.

1. FIRST OF ALL HE WAS A MAN BLESSED WITH A PROFOUND SENSE OF MERCY.

Let's not forget that the man who was sick was the Roman centurion's "servant;" that is a "slave." And in that First Century that Roman culture, a slave was a possession with no real rights of his own. The slave was a person whose **primary goal in life would have been to do what he was told**, precisely when he was told to do so—no more or no less even though some servants or slaves were treated much more graciously by their owners than others. **A slave back then was kind of like what a toaster, or a bicycle or a chair would be us today. If a servant was no longer useful to their master the slave**

could simply be left to die. But no, the sick servant of this centurion was **highly valued by him (v. 2)**, therefore, he petitions Jesus for healing. This is not a healing not for himself or even for a family member but for his servant; his slave.

2. SECONDLY, THIS CENTURION WAS A MAN WHO WAS OBVIOUSLY BLESSED WITH A PROFOUND SENSE OF RESPECT FOR OTHER PEOPLE—EVEN FOR THOSE PEOPLE WHO WERE OF A DIFFERENT RACE AND RELIGION.

This centurion was an officer in the Roman army occupying Israel. He was their overlord. They were the vanquished. **Yet his lips weren't curled in a thinly veneered sneer. His face wasn't that of a killer who enjoyed his work. His whole demeanor was softened at times, like that of General Schwarzkopf, by mercy. And his core value was one of constantly showing respect to other people.**

As a rule, most of the Romans considered all religions as equally true and yet false. They also believed that “**religion**” could be used primarily to help control people. So they were cynical, like Pilate, who at Christ's trial was to sneer, “**What is the truth?**” **As if nobody knew.**

This man, however, this centurion, had much more than a merely casual acquaintance with Judaism; and quite possibly, also much more than a merely casual acquaintance with Jesus too. He acted respectfully, even going so far as to build a synagogue for the local Jews. Clearly, he loved and served those people whom he ruled. He was a public servant, a giver, a man of constructive usefulness.

3. THIRDLY, HE WAS BLESSED WITH A SENSE OF HUMILITY.

This centurion was not the kind of **stereotypical soldier that many people might have presumed him to be.** He was also a man who with lived a profound sense of humility. He is even humble enough to ask Jesus for help. **He knew how to kill the enemy in battle, but he did not have the power to heal people from illness or disease as Jesus most obviously did—as the Son of God in human flesh and blood among us.**

He had heard that Jesus had many people over at Peter's house after the service in the synagogue in Capernaum one day. So he may have sent a soldier to fetch a **Jewish friend from the synagogue.** “*Would you go to Jesus and ask him to pay me a visit in order to heal my servant?*”

The Jewish friends of the centurion head out in Jesus' direction, but before they and Jesus can return, the centurion is overcome with humility. He sends out the Word to Christ, “***I am not worthy to have you come under my roof!***”

Obviously **this centurion knew enough about the Jewish faith and laws to know that if Jesus were to actually come under his roof, Jesus would have therefore been rendered ceremoniously unclean and he wanted to spare Jesus that defilement.**

Yes this man, the centurion, was blessed with a profound sense of **mercy** for all people and with a profound sense of **respect** for people of all different races and religions too. He was also blessed with a profound sense of **humility.**

4. FOURTHLY AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, HE WAS BLESSED WITH A MOST AMAZING FAITH.

Even if this centurion never had met Jesus in person before, or listened to his sermons, or see him cast demons out of others and heal people, he had, at the very minimum, **obviously heard about Jesus and believed that he had the very power of God available to him to cure human beings of all sorts of illnesses and disease.** Jesus even cast demons out of people who were possessed with unclean spirits too.

I don't know for sure, but I'd like to think that following the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ; once the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the disciples and the church was

born, that he may have even become baptized as a Christian, before Christians were considered enemies of the Roman Empire. He sent word to Jesus, ***“I’m not worthy to have you come under my roof. Just say the word and my servant will be healed, just as I have men under my command, and I say go and they go, you too can delegate this job—just say the Word” (Luke 7:6-8)!***

The Bible tells us that when Jesus heard this, he was **AMAZED AT HIM, AND TURNING TO THE CROWD FOLLOWING HIM, HE SAID: ‘TRULY I TELL YOU, I HAVE NOT FOUND SUCH GREAT FAITH EVEN IN ISRAEL!’** Then the men who had been sent returned home to the house and found the servant well (Luke 7:9-10).

So though this Roman centurion was blessed with many fine qualities that I believer were all given to him by the Holy Spirit of God—let’s all remembered what there was about this man that impressed Jesus, our Savior, the most: It was not that the man was a very merciful man, or that he showed a great deal of respect to other people; as important and valuable as that was. It wasn’t that he was blessed with a goodly amount of humility, though that was commendable too.

What drew our Lord’s commendation of this centurion was not even the fact that he had personally built for the people of faith there a synagogue; people whom he treated very kindly. What Jesus commended him for the most was his faith! In Hebrews 11:6, we read: “And without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. **Some of the greatest evidence in our lives that we truly have received the forgiveness of sins, and that we really are blessed with saving faith in God**—becomes apparent in our willingness to witness to the Gospel to others.

Friends, one Sunday a man came out of his house on his way to church. In the driveway of house adjacent to his own, his next door neighbor was loading his golf clubs into the trunk of his car. This neighbor then called out to the man on his way to church, “Henry, do you want to play golf with me today?”

Henry, with **an expression of self-righteous horror** on his face replied: **“This is the Lord’s Day and I always go to church every Sunday! There’s no way that I could play golf with you today!”**

After a moment of silent embarrassment, the golfer said: **“You know Henry, I have often wondered about your church and I have always admired your devotion. You know also, this is the seventh time that I have invited you to go to the course and play golf with me, and yet you have never invited me to go to church with you, not even once! Wow! That’s pretty shocking when you take time to think about it, and I can see how I, at times, may have been guilty of that same reluctance to witness to my neighbors in my neighborhood. Is it possible that you may be negligent of those same opportunities too? Have you? Amen**