

“An Unexpected Faith”

9th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 7: 1-10

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine
Associate Minister

May 29, 2016

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 • Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

Prayer of Invocation: Guide us, O God, by your Word, and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover peace; through Christ our Lord, Amen.

By the time we get to this passage from Luke this morning, Jesus has a terrible reputation. He spends his time with the wrong people. He pals around with the worst among us. He reaches out to the poor, the broken and the marginalized. Jesus also finds himself among the powerful of his time. He associated with people of means and influence. He even comes around enemies of Israel and offers them praise.

Today he enters Capernaum, a city in Galilee. At this time, about half the population was not Jewish. It had long been a magnet for Roman and Greek Gentile settlers. Galilee was seething with tension. The Roman Empire has power and Israel did not. The Empire bullied and the people of Israel tried to survive. The economic system was rigged in favor of the Romans, and the Romans were, after all, foreign occupiers. There had already been one Jewish revolt against Rome with two more would come. Jewish Galileans were supposed to hate Romans.

Our Story from the Gospel of Luke tells a curious tale. There's a military officer there in Capernaum, a Centurion. Centurions

formed the backbone of the Roman army, with authority and prestige. During Jesus' day Rome's military delivered brutality and demanded taxes. Historians say centurions commanded about 80 Soldiers and earned about fifteen times more than the men they supervised. This Centurion may well have been head of the occupying army in the town. He was the enemy-up close and personal. Luke's Gospel tells us that this Centurion had a slave who is sick, close to death.

A centurion who loves the Jewish people? Incredible! A centurion whose faith amazes Jesus? That is, well ... amazing!

Who is this centurion? His power and prestige make him a main character, but he actually does not appear in our story. He stays off stage. Jesus does not meet the centurion. Instead, two communities go between them.

One is the community of Jewish elders. They approach Jesus first. They make a case for the centurion being a good patron of the people. "He is worthy...he loves our people...he built our synagogue for us" (Luke 7:4-5). An enemy who happens to be a patron? An oppressor who loves the people? A slave owner who cares for his slave? The suspense increases.

Next come the centurion's friends. Near the house they intercept Jesus and deliver a message to him. "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under

my roof...but only speak the word and let my servant be healed” (Luke 7:6-7).

Second hand, through the friends, we hear what confidence the centurion has in Jesus. This officer of the Empire is used to giving orders. He knows the power of a word to get things done. “I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it” (Luke 7:8).

The centurion understands power. He also knows that the power of Caesar has limits. Caesar cannot heal. But the centurion has heard that Jesus can. And right now, in his home, death edges closer. There’s no time to waste. The centurion has confidence that Jesus’ authority extends beyond Caesar’s.

The centurion simply asks Jesus for a word, confident that his word alone carries healing power. Jesus listens to this enemy of his people, this outsider, and is wowed by his faith. Maybe he had never dreamt that a centurion, of all people, could have such confidence in God.

Usually, people are amazed at Jesus. But here, Jesus himself is amazed. He says to the crowd, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith” (Luke 7:9).

So here’s the question: what is it that amazes Jesus? I do think the centurion’s surprising confidence does amaze him. From such an unlikely character comes such clarity about Jesus’ authority. An enemy soldier proves to be a model for the people of God. Maybe there is a clue in that for us. God will deal with anybody. Faith can show up in anyone, even in our subordinates or our boss or our enemy. Faith can show up in unexpected people.

But I also think Jesus is amazed at the whole big picture; the way all the pieces and parts came together. Other communities translated the centurion’s situation and request; respect came from the Jewish elders, enthusiasm from his friends. He did not even need to meet the centurion.

At times in life others sustain us. Friends interpret our needs; they carry our hopes and our doubts to God. God uses them to help us; except it is not always easy to let them do that.

After the death of her adult daughter, a woman found that she could no longer pray. She longed for God and was mad at

God. She felt stuck and empty. She came to church to talk. We talked about her place in the community of faith. It did not make sense to her that others could carry her during this dry time in the desert of grief. She thought she should be able to do that herself. She wanted to do that herself.

But here in the church we rejoice with those who rejoice and we weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15), and life has a way of giving us opportunities to alternate, times when we carry others and times when we ourselves are carried. While she was in the desert for a season could she take a risk and let others carry her needs to God? Our friends, especially our church friends, can be a lifeline.

The whole big picture invites us to see how our connections to God are so interwoven with others. It is not just the centurion and Jesus. The big picture is much larger than the centurion and Jesus. Yes, it is the two of them *and* the faith community *and* people outside that community working together so God can heal.

The more we take the time to get to know one another and share our life struggles with the one another, the deeper the connections we make. The richer our experiences together are,

the more we understand where each other is in life and on his or her journey of faith. Wrestling with the same issues of injustice? Yearning for a respectful dialogue in our political process? Struggling to find happiness in the dark place you find yourself?

Sometimes when you least expect it, someone shares a piece of wisdom, an encouraging word, a blessing that offers you hope. **‘There are people who make you believe, in ways that you can't fully explain, that there's something important to accomplish in this life. Sometimes it's a seemingly random encounter. The words of a stranger that somehow say, “You have work to do. Get on with it.”** (Sonia Sotomayor, *My Beloved World*, p. 245).

We have work to do. Amazing work. In just a few moments, we will take time to intercede for others in prayer. Like the friends who bring concerns to Jesus, we will have an opportunity to pray for others. Today we can also give thanks for people who have interceded for us in our lives.

The Centurion may have been the last person Jesus expected to have faith in his ability to heal. Every moment of every day **God's reign surrounds us in ways we may not recognize easily.** But we can ask for eyes to see, to see the world filled with **God's amazing reign.**

The reign of God is broader than any denomination, even broader than Christianity itself, even broader than the lines we draw that label some enemies and others friends. Think of the people who have shaped you. The school teachers you saw every day. The coaches who barked orders and encouraged you to be what you could be. The music instructors, the mentors; so many adults whose religious commitments you may or may not have known.

When the pieces came together on that day in Capernaum **Jesus was amazed and delighted to see this big picture of God's** reign. Lots of moving parts and pieces came together. With Jesus, the elders, the friends and the centurion did what no one of them could have done alone. The community stepped in and the result was that the last and final character in the story, the one off stage with no voice or vote, received healing. An unnamed slave got a second chance.

As Jesus said in his very first sermon,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. The Lord has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free (Luke 4:18).

The centurion petitioned Jesus to heal his slave. He used his power to advocate for the least of these. I can't help but wonder how the slave community might have spoken to Jesus about this healing. I imagine that conversation full of honesty with something like, "We're grateful that you healed one of us, Jesus, we really are. Would it be too much to ask that you heal all of us, by setting us all free?"

This curious tale gives us a glimpse, a snapshot, a foretaste of the amazing feast to come, when powerful and powerless sit at table together. When rich and poor, abled and differently abled, men and women and children, brown eyed and blue eyed, friends and surprising enemies, all feast together with the One who has created us, redeemed us, and who continues to sustain us with the most amazing hope. Thanks be to God.¹

Copyright 2016, First Congregational Church, UCC

¹ The sermon began as an assignment in my seminary exegesis class on *The Gospel of Luke*. It was helped along the way in collaboration with a weekly sermon group and Rev. Ann Palmerton with her *Amazing Jesus*.