

### An Example of Faithfulness

I am sure many of you know that we don't get to choose the readings every week. They are assigned on a three year rotating lectionary, with each year focused on a different gospel. Year A is Matthew, Year B Mark, and Year C, this year, is Luke, with passages from John thrown in during each year to complete the story arc. We've spent the last few weeks reading from the gospel of John, in a big interlude, but finally this week pulls us back to Luke's gospel. I mention this because the gospel writers are really quite different from one another, and therefore how they tell the story is distinct. That's important, because we have to focus on different things to really get the point each writer is trying to make. John is rather theoretical, and lyrical, and metaphorical. In his gospel, Jesus is the divine word, he is the bread of life come down from heaven, he is the way and the resurrection – such abstract and heady things. Luke, on the other hand, is an historian. He is factual, almost gritty in his realism. For instance, right before the passage for today, is Jesus sermon on the plain (it doesn't take place on a mount in Luke, but rather on a plain). And in his version there is no blessed are the "poor in spirit." That's too disconnected from concrete reality for him. He recalls Jesus saying blessed are the poor – actual poor, and blessed are the hungry – not for righteousness, but for food, and blessed are those who weep. It is not spiritualized, but focused on people's real lives and how God cares about those tangible and physical circumstances. There is no adornment, metaphors, or frilly spiritualization, so the details he includes in his accounts are important. So let's look at the details of this story and what it teaches us.

The story begins with a Roman centurion who is a slave owner, and his cherished slave has fallen gravely ill. So he sends for Jesus to ask that he heal the servant. It's really quite extraordinary. Slaves were property. He was under no legal obligation to go out of his way to get him medical help, much less from a Jewish rabbi. Now maybe this slave was particularly valuable – a hard worker, had a skill set that would be hard to replace, or was somehow integral to the running of the household - but that is not actually what is said. Luke tells us that the centurion cherished this slave. That is what that word he uses means, not valued but cherished. He truly cared for him, and so he went to noteworthy lengths to make him better. The centurion uses his substantial power and resources to give voice to one who was voiceless.

You'll remember on Pentecost Jesus promised to send the people an advocate. That is exactly what this Jewish servant already has – one who advocates on his behalf when he doesn't have the power to. This servant had a powerful advocate – someone who would use all of his political capital, cash in all his outstanding favors, to get what his servant needed. He asks some Jewish elders to and convince their miracle worker to do one on his behalf. This is what we all hope for in an advocate – one who has the authority to get things done, who also cares for us enough to go to Jesus on our behalf. This is also who Jesus is calling us to be through the gift of the Spirit – people who will give voice to the voiceless, who will go to Christ and beg for those who need his attention. And here, we have an early example of what it means. By placing this reading here in the lectionary we are getting a picture of what the Spirit is supposed to be leading us to do. Each of us is implicitly being asked, "who do you advocate for?" Or put to us in a

church service, “who do we use our resources to lift up and our place of power to give voice to?” Will other believe there is a heavenly advocate because they have known an earthly one?

Back to the details of the story – if you read closely, you’ll see that though the centurion is the major focal point of this story, he is never physically present in any of the interactions. It’s always people speaking on his behalf. In the first instance it is some Jews who press Jesus for him – telling him what a stand-up guy the centurion really is. Far from fearing him, the Jewish people love him, and he apparently loves them back. He even built their synagogue for them. They say he is truly worthy of having the Son of God listen to his plea. So Jesus goes. And then in the second encounter, it is again not the centurion himself, but rather some of his friends who meet Jesus on the road. And they appeal on his behalf as well, saying to Jesus he trusts you enough, he believes in your authority enough that he doesn’t need you to come in person but simply to say the word and heal his servant because he actually loves him.

This is unusual because these are not people he is giving an order to. These are the people over whom he rules, but he trusts them enough to let them make the appeal in his place. He knows how he has cared for them and he has no doubt that they will adequately, even fervently, plead his case. It calls us to ask what sort of relationships we have fostered with those around us, especially those who by many standards would be deemed beneath us or over whom we have power. When you need something who would plead for you? Who would vouch for your inherent worth to the community and essential goodness? Would those around us say to the Lord, “they do so much, truly they are worthy of your attention”? Would the people who we employ or otherwise hold power over say, “they are so kind and caring in the way they treat everyone that surely Jesus, you yourself would be pleased with their show of love”?

But the final detail that Luke includes is the most surprising of all. He quotes Jesus as saying that not even in Israel had he experienced such faith. That had to be a bit tough for the Jewish audience, since the character was not just a non-Jew, but rather a Roman official – the type who would normally lord over them and make their lives miserable. I must admit, when the story started and I read there is a centurion, I want to distrust and dislike him. Centurions are not good fellows. They treated the Jews terribly – they are the sorts who oversee crucifixions, and this one owns Jewish slaves. But he is different. He cherishes his servant and cares for his well-being. Luke is setting us up here to make a point. I told you the last chapter had been Jesus famous sermon on the plain, and his last three points in that sermon are to love your enemy, not judge others as the world judges them, and know a tree by the quality of fruit it bears. He is challenging us here to who absorbed the message of his sermon. He wants us to ask who is the better follower of Jesus – the centurion who recognizes Jesus’ power and calls upon him to heal his servant, or the people who are supposed to be his followers but pre-judge this man for who we think he is, without taking into account his actions and demonstrated character.

Jesus makes the answer clear. This man has the remarkable faith. The Greek word for faith he is using here, *pistis*, doesn’t mean intellectual or even spiritual assent to certain principles or tenets. It is not abstract at all. Remember Luke is focused on the concrete and tangible. The word means something more like faithfulness – the noun that described actions that prove what you really hold dear. He is saying that following Jesus is perceptible – like building a temple that doesn’t benefit you, caring for people that have less power than you, making every attempt to make another’s life better because it is within your power to do so. That is the faith

that Jesus is looking for: To advocate for those without a voice, and to live your life in such a way that others would advocate for you. That's it, that's faith; that is faithfulness.

Luke is trying to tell us that Jesus has just one standard, across the board. His followers don't get graded on a curve against others, so stop judging; it's just making us fall farther behind in the standard that really matters. The important question is: Do we do all we can to care for those the Lord has placed in our lives, no matter their role? And do we live life so generously, with so much integrity and affection for those around us, that they would all stand up and appeal to God our own behalf? That is the faithfulness that Jesus is still looking for – a perceptible sign that we know who we follow and what he cared about.

There is no deep metaphor, no hard to grasp analogy or confusing parable. Luke simply give us the details of the story that paint a crystal clear picture of what the life of being Jesus' disciples looks like. It is not about believing in some abstraction; it is about living out that faith in a consistent and noteworthy way. So, who in your life do you need to advocate for? On whose behalf do you need to appeal to Jesus? Who has needs that you could use your influence to help meet? And is your life lived in such a way that others would vouch for you as one who does truly follow the teachings of Jesus in a notable and tangible way? That is faithfulness. May Jesus find our faithfulness as remarkable as the centurion's. Amen