

SERMON CCI Luke 7: 1-10

Have you ever been surprised by faith in an unexpected person? Someone you never would have guessed to be a person of faith? That's what we find in this story. Three people star in this morning's scripture reading—Jesus, the centurion, and his slave. We know the least about the slave. We know he was a young man, probably a teenager. As a slave, he worked for his master, the centurion. In the Roman empire, slaves could be mistreated and even killed legally. One ancient writer commented that “when your animals are old, you throw them out to die. You do the same with your slaves.”

And yet, this slave was highly valued by his master, the centurion. Luke tells us he was sick to the point of death. Matthew's gospel (Matthew 8:5-13) adds that he was paralyzed and in great pain. The centurion had surely done all he could for him. Doctors had done what they could. Without a miracle, his time was short. Which is why the centurion sent for Jesus. *He needed a miracle.*

We know much more about the centurion. He lived in Capernaum, a small fishing village on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. A centurion was the captain of 100 soldiers. They were chosen for their leadership ability and absolute dedication to the Emperor. Centurions had authority over their soldiers. When a centurion gave an order, his soldiers obeyed. If a centurion said, “Jump,” the appropriate response would be, “How high, sir?” Centurions were Gentiles and had responsibility to keep the peace and order in the region. They could be cruel as they did their work. Centurions were the clearest sign to the Jews that their home land was occupied by a foreign power. They were not appreciated by the Jewish people. The most famous centurion in the NT was the one who watched Jesus die and exclaimed, **“Surely this man was the Son of God.”**

The centurion in this story was not cruel, and had a reputation for supporting the Jewish people in Capernaum; in fact, he had provided the funds to have their synagogue built. Whether he used his influence to get Roman funds to build the synagogue, or used his own money, he got it built, and the Jewish leaders owed him big time. So he decided to call in the debt. He sent for some of the Jewish synagogue leaders to get help from Jesus for his slave.

What did the centurion know about Jesus? He had clearly heard about his miracles; Jesus did many of his miracles around Capernaum. Had he also heard any of Jesus' teachings? Had he heard Jesus say just before this story, “Love your enemies, do good to them?” Surely he recognized that most Jews considered **him** a necessary enemy. But his slave's need was so great, he called the Jewish leaders

and sent them to ask Jesus to heal his slave. Notice the centurion sent them to Jesus; he didn't ask them. He had built their synagogue for them, now they needed to do this for him. He had them over a barrel; how could they refuse?

The Jewish leaders had to swallow their pride, push aside their dislike for Jesus and his teachings, put aside their disdain for the way the crowds loved him, and go to Jesus. Normally, the Jewish leaders only came to Jesus to trap him; this time they came with their hat in their hand asking for help... for a Gentile, no less, someone they wouldn't normally care about. Asking him to do something they would never do except under duress: go to a Gentile's house, and love their enemy enough to do good to him.

The Jewish elders piled on the compliments about the centurion to talk Jesus into this. He loved the nation of Israel, and he proved it by building the synagogue in Capernaum. They begged him. If anyone deserved Jesus' help, it was this centurion. They were even willing to pretend that they believed in Jesus' power to get this debt taken care of.

And Jesus went, true to his word about loving our enemies and doing good to them. But as he came near the centurion's house, the centurion's friends stopped him with a new message from the centurion: "Don't come any closer, Lord. I'm not worthy to have someone like you in my home." Lord means master, someone of authority. He was acknowledging that Jesus' had higher authority than himself. The centurion had the authority to order his troops and they obeyed. He believed Jesus had that kind of authority over illness. He didn't need to come inside, pray a loud prayer, or touch his paralyzed legs. Just say the word, Jesus, and the ailment will be gone. Did the centurion realize he was saying he believed Jesus had the authority to order the very universe itself to do his bidding? Had he seen Jesus' miracles? One time Jesus ordered the winds and waves of a storm to be still and they quieted immediately. Another time he upended the law of gravity to walk on water. He gathered the molecules of the air and created bread and fish to feed the hungry crowds. Soon He will even reverse the relentless decaying of a dead body and call Lazarus out of his grave. The centurion had faith that Jesus could, with just his voice, do something he had never seen.

It's no surprise that Jesus was amazed by the centurion's faith and he told the crowd that had followed him to the home, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." Only twice in the gospels was Jesus said to be amazed:

- Here he was amazed by this centurion's faith.

- You heard Rob preach a few weeks ago that in Nazareth, Jesus was amazed at the people's **unbelief** which made it impossible for him to do any miracles there.

This Gentile centurion had more faith than the people claiming to be the people of God. More faith than the Jewish leaders who asked Jesus to heal the slave had. And without even a word from Jesus, the centurion's friends returned to his home to find the slave healed and well. It didn't even take a word from Jesus to make it so. Even in his absence, the diseased paralyzed nerve cells and synapses kicked into action, the paralysis and pain was gone, and he had his life back. All because a Gentile centurion had faith in what Jesus could do.

It wasn't because the centurion was worthy and deserved a miracle. Even the centurion didn't believe that no matter how the Jewish leaders tried to spin it that way. His providing funds for the synagogue was great, he appears to have been a generous man, perhaps even a kind man, but that didn't earn him his miracle. It wasn't because he believed all the right things, had the right heritage, or went to the synagogue every Sabbath. He didn't do any of that. It was by the grace and love of God in response to his amazing faith that the miracle came. He had the kind of faith Jesus longed to see in his own Jewish people, and didn't.

So does Jesus find our faith as Community Church of Issaquah amazing today? Does Jesus find a centurion kind of faith among us here. Faith that is willing to risk? The centurion didn't know much, but what he knew he was willing to take a chance on. Think about the risk of faith he took. He knew he could demand that the Jewish elders do what he wanted, but what if Jesus wouldn't come? Then what would people think? What if Jesus rebuked him for not being Jewish? Or what if Jesus tried to cure his slave but failed? What if he did everything he knew how and nothing worked? What if . . . What if . . . What if . . . What if . . .

Community Church of Issaquah, you are facing a future full of "what ifs." You voted to trust God enough to call a full-time pastor. And yet some Sundays, does anyone look around and wonder "What if we try to call a pastor and no one will come?" "What if we do everything we know to do and still fail?" Anyone find themselves praying in faith for this church to grow and also finding themselves doubting it can really happen?

Someone said that "faith is belief plus unbelief and acting on the belief part." Is that where we are right now? We have some faith, enough to risk voting to call a pastor and dream about having the church continue and maybe even grow a little. But when we're really honest, we have trouble believing this is going to work. And

it's easier to act on our unbelief than our belief. To set our expectations and dreams low. Sometimes we are afraid to "put God on the spot" by asking him for something outrageously huge-like the healing of a desperately ill slave. After all, you've tried to grow for years under various pastors, and look where you are. It's understandable. The more we need a miracle that hasn't happened before, the easier it is to stop expecting one. But then that story of Jesus in Nazareth where he could do no miracles because the people didn't believe he could, hits us in the face. Faith puts the unbelief part aside and risks acting on the belief part because our trust is in the goodness, power, and faithfulness of God, not ourselves. That's where the centurion was and it became his moment of amazing faith.

So friends, how big are our prayers for Community Church of Issaquah? Just big enough to keep it going until you pass from this earth? Or are we praying God-sized prayers to become a church that matters? A church that makes a difference in Jesus' name. How long has it been since you prayed for something Only God Can Do? How long since you risked trying to do something that drove you to prayer because you knew it was impossible without God's power? The life of faith is always a life of risk. Are we open to receive all that God has for this church?

Poet Nancy Spielberg, sister of movie director Steven Spielberg, wrote these words:

Lord, I crawled across the barrenness to you
 With my empty cup, uncertain,
 In asking any small drop of refreshment.
If only I had known you better,
 I'd have come running with a bucket.

Faith is not trying harder to do what we've always done. Faith is when we recognize our deep need of God's power, we throw away our little cup of low expectations, and then, with shaky steps, we take the risk to come running to Jesus with a bucket. Jesus can do amazing things when we bring him our bucket. But we'll never know until we come running.

Lord Jesus, Master of the universe You created, we come to you recognizing our deep need for your power. We have dreams for this church that look impossible and some days we admit we just don't believe they'll ever happen. We need your power, Lord, nothing that really matters will happen without your power. So we're

bringing you our bucket and asking you to fill it with your dreams and your power. Fill us with faith that is willing to risk doing what's unfamiliar, faith that is not satisfied with just carrying on, faith that lifts God-sized prayers. We're bringing you our bucket, Lord, fill it with your power.