

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT But Only Speak the Word

Luke 7:1-10

Dr. Douglas A. Learned

Sunday, March 25, 2012

First service - 8:15 a.m. Chapel; 9:15 and 11 a.m. Sanctuary

Many of you know that a group from NPC recently attended a Lenten Retreat at Holy Cross Abbey in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia. We asked the congregation to pray for us on that retreat, and I was touched by how many people have approached me to say they did just that. This is a prayerful congregation, which is one of the great joys I have in serving as one of your pastors.

At the retreat we read some wonderful selections that provoked deeper reflection on the power of Christ's ministry among us. One of them was a wonderful quote attributed to Mother Teresa of Calcutta. It goes like this (perhaps you've heard it):

"I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing God who is sending a love letter to the world."

That's one for the refrigerator door, isn't it? It is such a beautiful and sensitive expression of one's personal mission for Christ in the world. It has humility, "I am a little pencil,"—great things can be done through small acts. "I am in the hand of God," she says. In other words, I'm his instrument, but he is the power behind all I say and do.

"God is sending a love letter." God so loved the world that he sent his only Son. This is the love letter that is being sent to all. As it says in Galatians 3:28, *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* The message of the Gospel transcends all boundaries, to reach every person with a personal message of good news: *"you are my beloved...now follow me."*

These Christian ideals of humility, of serving as an instrument of God, of God's desire to have a loving and personal relationship with each one of us...and the celebration of the fact that God desires to reach to all people (not just those in our immediate sphere of influence or our friends)...all point us to our passage from Luke 7.

There we meet a man who lives in Capernaum, on the north side of the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus was engaged in ministry at the time. Luke does not mention the man's name in this passage, but only refers to him as a centurion. A centurion, as the title suggests, was the commander of a hundred men in a Roman legion. The Bible dictionary tells me this is the rough equivalent of company commander in today's terms.

In other words, this is a man with earthly authority and power. His men did what they were told, and he had power to do great destruction with those one hundred men if he wanted. He had only to speak the word, and his men could cut down thousands, take any building or hill, or quell any rebellion against the ruling powers. Got the picture?

But what do the Jewish elders say of this man? Look at verse 5, when they are speaking to Jesus, ... *"for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us."* He is not hard, hurtful, or controlling with the people of the community of Capernaum, trying to keep everyone in his place. No, instead, the Jewish elders say, "He loves all of us." In addition, he works for their cause by building a synagogue, which clearly he was not obligated to do.

It is worth noting that the Greek word used here for love in the phrase *he loves our people* is *agape*, which is the love we associate with Jesus' ministry on earth, a self-sacrificing love that leads him to the cross. It is clear he is not in this to advance the perception of his own authority, to show that he is successful or in control or can dominate others. He doesn't brag about the hundred men at his beckoning. He takes a humble, loving approach toward all. He thereby acts as a model of servant leadership, which is the kind of leadership that ushers others into the kingdom of God.

When people see such a leader, regardless of where they come from, regardless of their cultural or religious upbringing, they instinctively recognize that kindness, gentleness, and compassion are of God. If they don't know it yet, then we pray that God might fashion each one of us to reflect such love, and to lead in this way. We know, and certainly God knows, that we all need help to do that, and I count myself first in needing such help. This man's actions and words overflow with kingdom values and qualities.

Verse 2 reads, *A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. When [the centurion] heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to [Jesus], asking him to come and heal his slave.* Now, we might take offense at the fact that the centurion had a slave at all. We should take offense. It's an abomination! However, slavery was common at the time, and affected people of all races. What was uncommon in the Roman world was for someone to treat a slave with personal care and compassion. The Greek word for *valued* carries the connotation not of valued as in property, but valued as in *considered precious or honored*.

Thus the centurion turns to the Jews, who might normally resent such a person, requesting that they approach Jesus to ask help for his servant. These Jewish elders tell Rabbi Jesus that the centurion's request is worthy of his attention. It turns out that when you treat people with kindness, they stand with you.

When the centurion hears that Jesus is coming to make a personal visit, he says something surprising through the friends he dispatches to speak to Jesus, who is on the way. You'll find the message he sends in the middle of verse 6, *"Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not come to you."* Here he is being sensitive to that fact that Jesus is a Jew, and he knows Jews were not always allowed to enter into the home of a Gentile, or others ritually unclean.

Then he says this amazing thing—the diamond phrase in this passage...*“Only speak the word, and let my servant be healed.”*

Only speak the word. What is significant about that expression is that it is a remarkable statement of faith in the power of God, in and through his Son, Jesus. Already, surely by the touch of the Holy Spirit, it has been revealed to the centurion that Jesus has authority to cure people of their afflictions.

As a good military person, he knows if someone in authority speaks, obedience must follow. As a company commander, he only has to utter the command and it will be done. He doesn't even need to be present to do it. He just has to say it, no questions asked. A military structure is grounded in this dynamic. If orders are not followed, an army falls in disarray.

But the tender part of the centurion's statement is his implicit recognition that Jesus will use his power and authority for the purpose of healing. This is how the kingdom order differs from the order of this world. We know that those who are of the kingdom reflect Jesus' teaching in Luke 6, just preceding this passage. Verse 45 says, *The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.*

At the end of Luke 7, our passage for this morning, Jesus touches on the same idea, lifting up the centurion's faith and trust in the word of God, *I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.* As in the case of the Good Samaritan, Jesus is pointing out how even non-Israelites – outsiders – can reflect kingdom values. Luke concludes his report by saying, *When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.*

I share one other meaningful quote with you, which is also attributed by many to Mother Theresa, although we can't know for sure. Whether she said it or repeated it doesn't change the fact that she certainly lived it.

Lord when I am hungry, give me someone needing food.
When I am thirsty, send me someone needing a drink
When I am cold, send me someone to warm
When I am grieved, send me someone to console
When my cross grows heavy, let me carry another's cross too
When I am poor, lend me someone in need
When I have no time, give me someone I can help a little while
When I am humiliated, let me have someone to praise
When I am disheartened, send me someone to cheer
When I need understanding, give me someone who needs mine.
When I need to be looked after, give me someone to care for
When I think only of myself, draw my thoughts to another.

Friends, think on these things. When we give of ourselves, beyond our own power or resources, those around us experience the power of God. Know this: God can speak his word through you. You need only speak the word, by how you live your life.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.