

September 17, 2017

*“Lessons from a Centurion”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 7:1-10

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Whenever I hear this scripture, I can imagine in my mind's eye the Centurion we just heard about in today's reading. I've been in Capernaum, and I can visualize him walking through the town square there, carrying his helmet under his arm, wearing a hard leather breastplate, crimson cloak flowing in the breeze off Lake Galilee. His face shows a week's worth of beard growth. His complexion is ruddy and hard. He's probably as grizzled, tough, and experienced an old soldier as there ever there was one. And nobody in their right mind would want to mess with him because they fear him.

You see, back in the days when the Roman army controlled the entire civilized world, a Centurion commanded a force of approximately a hundred men, thus the name “Centurion” for a century of men. And this force was to be feared. They were experts in death and destruction. Their ranks were filled with men skilled with short swords, long swords, javelins, and archers. And they honed their skills in this land, Judea, where life was cheap. And their mission was no nonsense. They were to suppress and control the Jewish people by any means possible. For instance, like we heard last week – Pilate's soldiers killing Jews making their sacrifices at the temple. In another instance, not too many years after Jesus' death and resurrection, they massacred over three thousand five hundred Jews, two thousand by crucifixion. And then in the year 70 A.D., according to the Jewish historian Josephus, they killed 1.3 million Jews in the destruction of Jerusalem.

So, given that reputation, you might imagine that a Roman Centurion would come to Jesus with one mind-set – demanding, arrogant, prideful, and tyrannical. But no, this centurion is quite a different person than his outward persona might show. Instead, this soldier has an attitude of humility. He doesn't even feel worthy enough to come before Jesus, so he asks some of the Jewish leaders he knows to go to Jesus on his behalf, and say, “My servant is sick and dying, can you save him?” So they go and appeal to Jesus on the centurion's behalf. “This man deserves your help, Jesus” they tell him, “for he loves our people and it is he who built our synagogue.” Wow! Not only is the centurion humble, but he actually loves his enemies and is generous toward them. After hearing this, Jesus agrees to their request and begins to go with them to the centurion's house. But there's more. After further reflecting on the favor he is asking of Jesus, the centurion thinks twice about having Jesus come under his roof. To the house of a pagan. So he sends the message, “Jesus, please don't trouble yourself by coming to my home. I am not worthy of that honor. I am not even worthy to come and meet you. Just say the word,

just say the word, and my servant will be healed.” Now think about that. Just say the word. In the very first chapter of St. John's Gospel, we read, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*” Somehow this centurion knew the power of the “word,” the power of Jesus Christ. For here was Jesus, who commanded no one – no company of soldiers, who had no home to lay his head, who had no slaves to do his bidding. This centurion on the other hand had all those things. And yet it is the centurion who acknowledges that over all matters, all things on earth or in heaven, sickness and health and life and death itself, there is only One we need go to with our requests in reverent humility... Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. “Just say the word.” And then Jesus says something about the centurion that you don't find him saying very often in the Bible about nearly any person. He complements the man, because even Jesus was amazed at his righteousness. “I tell you, I haven't seen faith like this in all Israel.” And, of course, the centurion's servant was healed.

So what are the lessons we can learn from this story? Well, there are many. The most obvious is to love your enemies. And there are also those wonderful lessons about the virtues of kindness and generosity, and humility, and, of course, faithfulness, that we see in the centurion. These are all characteristics God wants to see in us as well. And, of course, another lesson is that with God, all things, even miracles, are possible. But I think there is an even more important lesson, that's not so obvious, but that highlights a common human flaw, highlights a vice, that God does not want to see in us. And that is how we seem so eager to judge others. How we so easily label people with our stereotypes. You see, in this story, the centurion surprises us because he did not fit the typical stereotype. Let's go back to the reputation of the Roman soldiers. If we had been living in those times and not known what kind of man he really was, we probably would have immediately judged him contemptible because he was a foreigner in our land, living off our support, therefore undeserving of our consideration, and certainly unworthy of Jesus' mercy because he was not of our religion. And yet, from this man, a feared centurion, we see only humility, love, beneficence, and faith. Wouldn't our erroneous judgment put us to shame?

Someone once said, “Don't get caught up in judging and labeling people. Each of us is so much more than one word can describe.” And yet those one words seem so prevalent in our society today. Especially those one words that are so opposed, so in conflict with the Word made flesh. A favorite expression the younger generation often uses to describe some people is “loser.” And, of course, Muslims are “terrorists”, even though they worship the very same God we do, and most Muslims just want to live in peace like we do. Any Hispanic is probably an “illegal.” And there are those we call

fags...fundamentalists...pro-life...pro-choice...white supremists...antifas...loudmouths...and just plain jerks, to name only a few. And not only is using these labels contrary to how God wants us to love our neighbor, but there is the real danger that things can so easily get out of control. Because judging and labeling people can lead to name calling, and then verbal abuse, and even physical abuse. How often have we seen that happen recently on the news? Bullying, which is so prevalent in our schools, is another symptom of judging and labeling. And it's distressing that these children primarily learn their behavior from, who? Their parents, of course, and if it's not changed, they take that behavior with them into adulthood. You know, I once saw a poster that had pictures of several toddlers of different nationalities and ethnic groups playing together. And at the bottom of the poster were the words, "No one is born prejudice." Think about it, "No one is born prejudice."

But, oh, how we do change. And how we do judge. And yet we need to be aware that the Bible is pretty adamant about judging people. It says, *Do not judge or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.* And, *Why do you look at the speck of dust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye.* And, *Do not condemn and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.* And *You have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.* So, how should we act? Well, let's see what the Bible says about that. *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs.* And *The words and wisdom that come from heaven are first of all pure, then peace loving, considerate, and full of mercy.* Finally, *Brothers and sisters, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good repute... If there be any virtue and if there be anything worthy of praise, think on these things.* These are words and thoughts we should live by. These are words from God that should describe how we live. Words that make for a more peaceful and tolerant and loving world. Wouldn't that be wonderful!

You know, at the beginning of my sermon I mentioned how that Centurion probably walked through Capernaum instilling fear in all those he passed by. But consider that he too, could have been wary and fearful of the masses. For you see, we fear and judge what and who we do not know. But the Bible also tells us that perfect love casts out fear. And when we cast out fear and judgment, what happens? We instead become busy doing what God wants us to do... loving, showing mercy and compassion. being kind and generous. Somehow, somehow, the Centurion knew that. Shouldn't we? Amen.