

When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ² There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. ³ The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. ⁴ When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this," ⁵ because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." ⁶ So Jesus went with them.

He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. ⁷ That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁸ For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

⁹ When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." ¹⁰ Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well. (Luke 7:1-10)

Has Jesus Found such Great Faith Among Us?

We all have people we look up to as examples of Christian faith and life, right? I think of some of the Christian gentlemen in the different congregations that I grew up in and in the churches that I've served. Most of them weren't pastors, but they were men who knew their Savior and set an example for us all. Who do you know like that? Whose faith has impressed you over the years? This morning, Luke tells us about a man like that. In fact, his faith was so extraordinary that Jesus himself said, **"I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel."** That was a pretty telling remark, because this man was a gentile, a Roman army officer. Almost certainly, when he came to the land of Israel, he did not believe in the one true God. But God reached him with the Old Testament scriptures and gave him faith, a faith that Jesus held up as an example to the people of Israel. As much as that was a compliment to this man, how do you suppose the Jewish people felt when Jesus said it? They might have wrestled with it a little bit. Now fast forward two thousand years. Would Jesus have to say to us, "I have not found such great faith even among Lutherans?" This morning, Jesus gives us an example of faith so that we can grow in our own. **Has Jesus found such great faith among us?**

I.

This Roman army officer was essentially doing the same thing we do when we pray. His servant – most likely a slave – was dying. When he heard about Jesus, he asked the Lord to heal this servant. Why did he make that request? Because he had faith. You see that in his life in general. He had built a synagogue – a Jewish house of worship – in Capernaum. He loved the Jewish people. Those things were fruits of his faith and the prayer he offered came from the same place. **Has Jesus found such great faith among us? Does our faith produce prayers like this?**

We can learn a lot about prayer from the request this centurion made. The first thing to note is how humble the request was. When he sent the message to Jesus, he didn't whine or complain about how unfair it was that this servant whom he valued so much, was in danger of dying. He didn't in any way criticize the way God was taking care of them. He merely asked God for help. And he didn't argue that he deserved that help, either. He didn't point to that synagogue he had built or anything else he had done as earning some kind of reward. Now, the Jewish leaders who came to Jesus did do that. They told Jesus that the centurion deserved to have this done for him because he had done all that stuff. But the centurion himself didn't make that argument. In fact, he didn't even dare to show his face to Jesus himself. He didn't feel worthy to have Jesus come into his house. He humbled himself before the Lord.

And yet, he trusted that the Lord would allow him to make his request. He trusted that God hears and answers prayers. He trusted that Jesus had the power to solve his problem. That was the point of that comment about the soldiers. This man was probably the commander of the detachment of soldiers in Capernaum. Roman discipline was strict and severe. When an officer gave an order, soldiers obeyed without question. This Roman centurion trusted that it would be the same with Christ. If he just spoke a word, if he just gave a command, it

would be obeyed, not by soldiers, but by the very forces of nature itself. All Jesus had to do was speak and a dying man would be healed.

Do we come to Jesus with that kind of faith? Do we trust that he can solve our problems with a word? I hope we do, and I'm sure that at our best moments we do. But when real crises come, when people we love are in danger or dying, is there a part of our hearts that doesn't really believe that Jesus can take away this cancer, this heart disease, this trauma from an accident? Or if we do believe that he can, how often do we come to him doubting that he will? How often do we pray almost out of guilt for not praying, but not really expecting that the outcome is going to be any different because we did pray? As far as that goes, how often do we come humbly before our God, acknowledging that he doesn't owe us anything? How often do we instead rehearse in our own minds all that we've done for the Lord and expect him to repay us? How often don't we think that we're good people, so things like this just shouldn't happen to us? How often do we whine and complain about how unfair it is that we have to face all this before we get around to asking God for help?

Does any of that sound like you and your prayers? I know my prayer life just isn't what this centurion's was. What's wrong with us? Very simply, we're sinners. Inside of each one of us there's an unbeliever, what the Bible calls the Old Adam. He hates the Lord and he doesn't trust him one bit. He attacks us just when we're praying and he undercuts our confidence in the Lord. The sin in our hearts weakens our faith, often to the point where we aren't an example to anyone.

But Jesus still loves us. He came into this world and lived a life of perfect trust in his Father. He walked to Calvary because he trusted in God's plan for him and for us. He prayed constantly, reverently, confidently – and he did it in our place. His perfect life of faith and prayer counts for us. It replaces all the times our Old Adam undermined our faith and our prayers. Then Jesus laid that perfect life down on the cross to pay for us. He suffered the hell and the death we deserve because we have an Old Adam that doesn't love God. He suffered the punishment we have coming for every time we whined and complained and thought that God owed us better treatment than he's given us. He paid for every time we said or thought that it's just not fair. He stood in our place on the cross for every time that we failed to trust that Jesus could or would hear us and help us. He paid all that we owe for all that sin.

Then he rose. He rose and announced that we are paid for completely and absolutely. He rose and promised that all record of our sin and weakness is gone forever. He rose and he promised to hear and answer every single one of our prayers. Of course, that's what he did for the centurion, right? His messengers came back to the house and found the servant well. Jesus heard the prayer offered in faith and he answered it. And he promises us the same thing. Now, he does not always grant what we ask. But even when he doesn't, he still does what is best for us. He still bends down from his throne in heaven and gives his full attention to our needs and our hurts and our fears. He listens and answers every time we pray.

II.

As much as this lesson is about the centurion and his faith, it's even more about Jesus and our faith. God recorded this lesson so that we can hear how our Savior responds to an exemplary faith and so that we can learn from it how he responds to ours – because ours might not be so exemplary. **Has Jesus found such great faith among us? Does our faith amaze Jesus like this?**

Luke says that Jesus was amazed at this Roman officer's faith. What does that mean? Well, it does not mean that he was surprised. Jesus is the Son of God. He gave this man his faith. He knew when he woke up that morning that this was going to be the morning when the centurion would send messengers asking him to heal his servant. As the Son of God who rules the universe, he decided that it was time for that centurion's slave to get sick so that this man would pray to him in faith. Nothing that happened that day caught Jesus off guard.

Yet, he was still amazed by what he saw. Why? Because he marveled at this beautiful, exemplary faith in a sinful world. He looked at his own handiwork and rejoiced at what he had done. Without a doubt, some of what's happening here is the fact that Jesus is true man just as he is true God. All true believers marvel at the mighty works of God. But he *was* also true God. And Jesus, the God-man, marveled that day. I think there might be a parallel here with everyday life that will help us understand. In front of the parsonage there are a number of ornamental bushes. Some were there when we moved in. Some my wife planted. This past week, they've all been in bloom at that same time – whites and reds and pinks. They're gorgeous. Sometimes, when my wife comes home from work, before she comes into the house, she walks around front to look at those ornamentals and the other flowers out there. Now, is she surprised to find them out there? No. She planted

some of them. And they've been blooming all week, so she knows they're out there. But she still stops and marvels at what God has done. She takes joy in seeing his handiwork.

Jesus took joy in the faith of this centurion, a faith that by all rights simply should not have been there, a faith that he himself created. That shows what Jesus' priorities are: us. Out of all the things in all the universe that the Son of God could've been doing at that moment, he was in Capernaum. He had taken on human flesh to save us. And with all the things that the promised Messiah could possibly have had on his mind on that day, he stopped to marvel at the faith of a man whose name the Bible doesn't even bother to tell us. Even though Jesus has now ascended into heaven where he has the whole universe on his mind all the time, he still marvels at the faith of his children down here. He still rejoices when he finds a faith like this.

But what if our faith isn't so exemplary? Does that mean he's disappointed in us, the way my wife is if her flowers don't bloom? In a sense, yes, especially if our faith is weak because we don't feed it or because we damage it by indulging our sinful desires. But Jesus loves all faith. He loves the mustard seed of faith that is only just beginning or that is fighting to survive in a harsh and sinful world. He rejoices in faith that returns to him after we sin. The prophet Isaiah said that a bruised reed he would not break and a smoldering wick he would not snuff out. That's Jesus tenderly feeding and caring for our weak faith so that it grows. Because he loves our faith, he sends the gospel in word and sacrament and he puts the power of the Holy Spirit directly into that message to grow our faith. He gives us congregations and pastors and teachers to feed our faith, to apply that gospel, to encourage us to hear it so that we grow in faith.

He even sends hardship so that our faith grows. The Bible says that pain and suffering come to purify our faith like gold being refined in the fire. That doesn't sound pleasant to me. God uses hurt to burn the impurities out of our faith, to teach us to let go of things that don't really matter here, to get rid of the distractions and sinful attitudes that weaken our faith. Of course, when we're going through that, we might be tempted to say, "God turn down the heat!" But he knows exactly how much heat we need and in love, he gives it to us. Because his goal is to make our faith like that Roman officer's faith was.

Why? So that we can stand up to all that happens in a sinful world. On this side of heaven, life has to hurt. And unless Jesus comes back first, we have to die. Our Lord gives us a faith that can survive death, that can survive life, that can endure attacks and opposition and disappointment and pain. He does it all so that we reach heaven where our faith will at last be perfect. Whether it is ever an example down here, in heaven it will be even greater and stronger than the faith of that centurion was. Jesus will marvel at it and rejoice over it forever.

All that is what Jesus is doing for us. He works every day toward that goal. Has Jesus found faith like that centurion's among us? I'm sure he has, because that's what he does. So whether anyone would ever regard you or me as an example of faith, whether we ever inspire other Christians with our lives and our attitudes, Jesus is working in our hearts. He is working on our faith. Jesus will bring us home through that faith. Rejoice in what he is doing in you, just like he rejoices. Amen.