

## Luke 7:1-10

It somehow seems appropriate on this Memorial Day weekend that the man before us in our text is a soldier; a centurion, having one hundred soldiers under his authority. He is also a Gentile, not a Jew. And yet elders of the Jews plead with Jesus to have Him come and heal this man's servant.

It is not rare at all for Jesus to heal the sick. It is rare, however, for Him to speak highly of someone's faith. He is usually doing just the opposite, saying to His disciples: "*Oh, you of little faith!*" or "*Where is your faith?*" Even putting forth the question, "*When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?*" But here Jesus addresses the crowd following Him and says of this centurion, "*Not even in Israel have I found such faith!*"

I wonder...in fact, should we not all wonder...what would Jesus say of us with regard to our faith? "But pastor, Jesus says that faith the size of a mustard seed is all I need!" True, as long as that faith is grasping and feeding upon the pure Gospel. Jesus is not impressed by the size of the centurion's faith. What impresses Him is that it is genuine.

This man really should have been full of himself. He has a place of authority here in Capernaum. And the Jews think highly of him. "*He is worthy!*" they tell Jesus, and here's why: "*he built us our synagogue!*" This centurion should have had a big head. He should have had the attitude of Naaman. Remember him? In 2 Kings 5, he was the commander of the army of Syria. He came to the prophet Elisha to be healed of his leprosy. But he became angry that Elisha did not come out to see him in person. Instead, Elisha sent out his servant with the command to wash in the Jordan River and be healed. This centurion should have had that same mind-set: pompous, conceited. But he does the opposite of Naaman. He insists that Jesus not come to his house in person, "*for I am not worthy!*" he explains, but simply to say the word and his servant would be healed.

So is he worthy or not? The Jews say he is; he says that he isn't. Who's correct...him or the Jewish elders? Jesus answers the question for us. This centurion's faith is greater, for it is genuine, than any of the Jews. The centurion is right.

A person of faith does not see himself as being worthy, not even when everyone around him is praising him and saying that he is. People of faith would not dare to have Jesus come under their roof, nor would they dare to come under His roof and enter His house. This centurion was an outsider, an outcast before God. He knew his place before God and he did not question it. "*I am not worthy!*" This was his staunch belief and confession.

And it must be ours as well. We've become too familiar with God. We hardly respect His name anymore, His house, His day, His worship. It shows in how we participate, sing, dress, and conduct ourselves. Are these not sacred to us anymore? Have we brought God down to the level of one of our buddies? Do we not pause, when entering His house, and say to ourself, "I am not worthy to come under His roof!"

There isn't one of us who deserves to be here. Like the centurion, we are all outsiders and outcasts before God...wretched, miserable sinners, the lot of us. Maybe our absent members have it correct - those who continually stay away from the house of God. "I am not worthy to come," they may be thinking. And if they are, they may be more on track than some of us who give no thought to such things.

Jesus praised the centurion's faith because he was humble. He was unworthy in his own eyes. Others looked at what he did; at what a good and decent man he was. But he did not. No matter what he did for others, he knew that he remained unworthy before God.

And yet he had the confidence to call upon Jesus and ask Him to heal his servant. There is this great tension within genuine faith. The person of faith does not dare approach the holy God, and yet he approaches Him in complete confidence. Like Queen Esther in the Old Testament, who did not dare enter the presence of the king

under penalty of death. But she, nonetheless, entered his presence, putting her own life on the line, for the sake of her people.

And so with the centurion. He dares to approach the unapproachable God for the sake of his servant who is at the point of death. Why does he? This man who is unworthy? Because he hears what Jesus is doing. Not just in healing the sick. He believes that this Jesus is God acting in mercy toward those who are helpless. In this faith he asks Jesus for help. In this faith Esther approaches the king. And in this faith you come here to approach the unapproachable God.

Because you have faith you dare not come under His roof, for you are a sinner and He is holy. But also because you have faith you believe His promise to forgive; to forgive all sinners; to forgive and receive you. And so you come in complete confidence.

When Queen Esther approached the king, he held out to her the golden scepter. She could freely enter his presence because of that sign. That golden scepter never leaves this house. It is the baptismal font which is always placed before your eyes. Baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, you are able to enter the presence of the holy God. There is no penalty of death for you. Jesus took it from you as He went to the cross for you.

Queen Esther would never have entered the presence of the king were it not that she was desperate to help her people. The centurion would not have approached Jesus on any normal day. But on this day he approaches Him in confidence only because of his great and desperate need. Is this not also why you come under God's roof? We come to this sacred ground, removing the shoes of our pride, because we are sinners in desperate need. Esther came to the king because there was no one else who could save her people. The centurion came to Jesus because no one else could heal his servant. You and I, though we are unworthy sinners who dare not come under God's roof, come with confidence because we believe that He is merciful to sinners such as we are. No one else can help us. There is no other healing for sinners like us. Only Jesus has what we need.

Friend, as Jesus healed the centurion's servant, so He heals you. He does not punish you for daring to enter His sacred house. He holds out to you the golden scepter of Holy Baptism. He declares you forgiven in those cleansing waters. He bids you to come to His sacred altar, not in fear, but in confidence. Here He gives you medicine for your body, but especially for your soul - His body and blood given and shed for you.

Our centurion did not need to see Jesus with his eyes. A word from His mouth was all he needed for his servant to be healed. That, friends, is genuine faith: believing without seeing. Naaman didn't have it. Doubting Thomas didn't have it. No one in all of Israel had it like this centurion. And nothing else can explain why you keep returning to God's house week after week. You come with all your unworthiness. You do not let fear keep you away. You come because you are desperate. You need God's mercy. You believe that He welcomes you, even though full of sin. You are just like the centurion. You do not come expecting to see Jesus with your eyes. All you need is to hear His word with your ears. Jesus' word, even though spoken by a sinful pastor, is that which forgives you and gives you heaven itself. And this you believe. This is why your faith is just as genuine as that of the centurion.

The word of Jesus did exactly what the centurion requested. His dying servant was made well. That very same powerful word is being spoken here today. Jesus' word of compassion is greater than your unworthiness. And so, dear fellow sinners, outcasts, and outsiders, God forgives you, one and all. Jesus' word declares it so. Be at peace with God and with each other. Amen.