

Luke 7:1-10

We enjoy sensationalism. We like to be astonished...amazed. And news broadcasters know this, which is why they bring us the stories which capture our attention—the home runs and fantastic catches in baseball, the acts of heroism which have saved lives. Even stories about criminals and their crimes are front-page news when they are of the stuff that will grip us and grab our interest.

But we don't simply enjoy being astonished; we like to astonish others. We like it when others notice us for our achievements. We want the attention and spotlight when we have done something that we think is deserving of praise.

A man who was deserving of such praise was the centurion in our text. He was not a Jew, yet he had high regard for the religion of the Jews. He built their synagogue in Capernaum; and because of all this he was loved and respected by the people. Normally a Roman commander would not receive such high esteem from the Jews, but this man had their praise and approval. When his slave became sick to the point of death, the elders of the people told Jesus, "This man deserves to have you come and heal his servant." They were impressed with him. They were amazed by his actions toward them, and so they stood by him in his time of need. "He is deserving of your help, Jesus," they said.

Now do you think that was really necessary? Was it necessary for the Jewish elders to speak with such glowing praise of the centurion in order for Jesus to come and heal his slave? What if they had said, "He's an awful man, Jesus; we don't think you should help him." Would such words have kept Jesus away? What we're asking is...Is anyone deserving of Jesus' help? And the answer is: No! Jesus didn't heal the centurion's slave because his kindness toward the Jews made him deserving. Jesus healed him because He is merciful. Jesus doesn't heal our sicknesses and broken bones because we are deserving of it, but rather, because He is merciful to us. Everything God gives us is given purely out of His grace and mercy, not because we deserve such kindness from Him.

When the Syrophenician woman begged Jesus to heal her daughter, Jesus' disciples urged Him to send her away. They did not think she deserved His help. They didn't "go to bat" for her as the Jewish elders did for the centurion. Yet, Jesus out of mercy, helped the woman by healing her daughter. Was anyone telling Jesus to help the thief on the cross? "Yes, Jesus, he is deserving of your help because he has done much good for others." No! There wasn't one person on his side. No one cared if Jesus helped him or even spoke to him, because he was a worthless, undeserving thief. And yet, Jesus had mercy on him and forgave him. "Today," He said, "You shall be with Me in Paradise."

Even though the Jews thought the centurion was deserving, he himself did not agree. His word to Jesus was, "I am not deserving for You to come to my house...just say the word and my servant will be healed." That must be our attitude toward God as well. Not like Paris Hilton..."I don't deserve to go to jail!" But instead: "I deserve hell for what I have thought, and said, and done."

Not only do we need to repent of our many sins, we need to repent of our attitude—that we think we deserve for God to forgive us; that we deserve His favor; that He should see Himself as fortunate to have someone like us serving Him in His church. The centurion

displayed no such attitude. “I am undeserving,” were his words to Jesus; “But just say the word and my servant will be made well.”

The Jews were amazed at this man because of his kind actions toward them. Jesus was amazed at him also, but not because of what he did, but because of what he believed. In fact, Jesus was so astonished that He said of the centurion, “I have not found such great faith even in Israel!” That probably didn’t sit too well with the Jews, to hear that this Roman had a greater faith than all of them. It should make us wonder what He would say about us. Would we astonish Him in a good way...or in a bad way like the Galatians astonished the Apostle Paul?

We suppose that God looks at us like everyone else does; that He sees and is pleased with our kind actions toward others. But we should know better. God is not impressed with good behavior. He’s not against it, but that’s not what impresses Him. He doesn’t care about home runs and fantastic catches. Even heroic acts do not move Him to tears—as if the things we do, kind and outstanding though they may be, can move us one inch closer to a place in heaven. Jesus wasn’t amazed by the great deeds of the centurion; but He was amazed by his faith. Here’s what the centurion said: “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.”

What made this statement so impressive to Jesus is not that he believed that Jesus could heal his servant. It’s not that he believed that Jesus would heal his servant. It’s that the centurion believed that Jesus was his servant. The centurion knew all about slaves. He had slaves; one was very sick. What impressed Jesus about this man is that he had the faith to see that Jesus was his slave. “The Almighty God will do what I ask; heal my servant, not because I deserve it, but because it is the nature of God to serve.” That is what the centurion believed, and that is a great faith.

Do you have such faith? If you believe you deserve the grace and mercy of God, then you believe in yourself and not in the mercy of God. On the other hand, if you think that God would never forgive a wretch like you, then even the thief on the cross had a greater faith—for he believed Jesus would forgive him. Faith truly says, “Woe is me...I am worthless and undeserving.” But it doesn’t just say, “Woe is me,” it also says, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner.” None of us deserves the favor of God. None of us deserves for God to forgive our many sins. But faith cries: “To hell with what I deserve! Jesus died for me. I am forgiven.”

Do you believe that Jesus served you in the waters of your baptism, claiming you as His own child, forgiving your sins? Then you have the faith of the centurion. Do you believe that as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup Jesus serves you His body and blood for your salvation? Then you have the faith of the centurion. Do you believe Jesus when He says, “I have come not to be served, but to serve, and to give My life as a ransom for the many”? Do you believe that God will take you to heaven when you die, not because you deserve it, but because Jesus became your Suffering Servant and He died and rose again for you? Then you have the faith of the centurion.

And if this is not yet where you are at in your faith, then hear this with your ears... Whether you believe it or not, Jesus is your Slave. He took your place under the Law. He lived a

perfect life for you. He suffered all that your sins deserved. He died your eternal death on the cross. He rose from the dead for you. And in His Word and Sacraments He comes to you as your Slave...your Servant, to give you faith; to give you forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Maybe you don't see yourself as the centurion, but even if you don't, you both have the same Lord; the same Savior; the same Servant and Slave. And so it doesn't matter if you have the greatest faith in all of Augusta, or all of Washington, or Marthasville—as long as your faith is in Jesus Christ. He is your Slave...your Servant. He forgives you. He saves you. Not because you are deserving, but because He is merciful to you. Amen.