

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

There's something very powerful about the story in our gospel this morning. Now be warned, it may not be what you think it is. We'll see as we go along. Let's start with the two main characters, especially since one is a centurion in the Roman army, a professional soldier, an officer with authority over around 100 soldiers. Now in those times, to be a centurion was to be a better soldier than those under your command, better with sword and spear, better at all things. If there was a battle then you led your soldiers into it, not issuing commands from somewhere in the back.

So here we have not just any centurion. He is a friend to the Jewish people, he built their synagogue for them, he was probably a "God-fearer," meaning that even as a Gentile and as a Roman, he honored and probably worshiped God. Now it was in his interest to get along with the people of Capernaum. After all it was his primary responsibility to maintain peace, but that wouldn't include building a synagogue.

Now, as we know this centurion also had a slave whom he valued highly, who was ill to the point of death. So he sent some of the Jewish elders to Jesus. Now this was an honor/shame society meaning that good deeds must be repaid in kind, so it could be argued that the elders were obligated to go to Jesus, but because of their words to Jesus, I don't think so. They "appealed to him earnestly," telling Jesus that this centurion "loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." They tell Jesus "he is worthy of having you do this for him."

One thing that quickly got my attention here wasn't so much that the Jewish elders went to Jesus. After all, the centurion has sent them. Now what caught my eye is that the elders believed Jesus could do this, that he could bring healing to the slave. Otherwise, why go? Why appeal earnestly to Jesus?

Another thing that caught my attention is that Jesus went with them. He did not demur. He simply went, he went without giving a thought to the fact that he might be doing this for a Roman, a centurion of the army occupying Israel. He went knowing that if he went into the centurion's home he would become ritually unclean, that he would have to undergo the Jewish purification rites.

Jesus doesn't draw a line here, he establishes no boundaries as to whether what he is doing is "proper," or how it will be regarded.

And this is the norm for Jesus. He converses with the Samaritan woman at the well. He marvels at the Syrophoenician woman who tells him "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." He is pleased with the Samaritan leper who comes back praising God when the other nine lepers rush off because they are cleansed. Time after time Jesus shows us that all are welcome to come to him, sinners and publicans, Gentiles, Samaritans, even Roman soldiers.

My attention is also caught by the faith of the centurion. His faith is bold, reaching to Jesus even through intermediaries. He knows that Jesus can do this thing, this healing. Yet there is more. He acknowledges through his friends whom he also sends to Jesus, that he is not worthy to have Jesus come under his roof, possibly a sign showing that he is aware that Jesus will be considered "unclean" if Jesus comes under his roof, but more likely a sign that the centurion is a humble man, that his words are even as he says, he simply is not worthy. You and I aren't worthy either, yet Jesus comes to us anyway, cleansing us, each of us, in a way that we cannot possibly do for ourselves.

Now we have the matter that the centurion fully expects, as a man who is himself under authority, that Jesus can from whatever distance, simply speak the word and his slave would be healed. And Jesus is amazed. Not even in Israel has he found such faith. Note that Jesus did not speak the word and make the slave well, he did nothing but express amazement but when the delegation returned to the centurion they found the slave well.

Keep in mind now that this story is not a lesson that the greater the faith, the greater your faith, the greater the miracle, the greater the healing. No, this story is about the grace and love and compassion of God expressed in and through Jesus. This story is about the Word made flesh who dwelt among us. This story is about the Word by which we as Lutheran Christians are to live, it is about living faith. It is about living in imitation of Christ who welcomed all people, who welcomes all people to his table, to the font. All are welcome, brothers and sisters, all are welcome.

AMEN