

May 29, 2016
2nd Sunday after Pentecost

“An Unexpected Faith”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Galatians 1:1-12 ~ Luke 7:1-10

Jesus had a terrible reputation. He spent time with all the wrong kind of people. He ate with the grungy and despised of the world. He associated with the worst among us. He reached out to the poor ... the broken ... the marginalized. In this expansive vision of hope, the gospel reaches full flower.

But Jesus also found himself among the powerful of his time. He associated with people of means and influence. He even drew near to the purported enemies of Israel and dared to praise them. Here too the gospel reaches full flower.

In either case, faith shows up in unexpected ways. In Luke 7, Jesus is approached *indirectly* by a Roman centurion seeking his help. He has a deeply cherished slave who is ravaged by illness. This centurion sees something in Jesus. He believes that somehow, someday ... this Galilean subject of Rome ... this mere peasant ... might be able to do the impossible ... that Jesus might be able to heal the sick and stave off the forces of death.

Oddly, the centurion and Jesus never meet face-to-face. All their interactions occur through the means of intermediaries. First, it is the local Jewish leaders who ask for Jesus' help. The centurion, they say, "is worthy of having you do this for him" (7:4). Hearing this, Jesus sets out apparently without much hesitation. Now, no one would have blamed him for having some suspicions. After all, entering the house of a Gentile could potentially make Jesus unclean.

Even more, a centurion is not your typically friendly neighbor. Centurions are the sharp edge of Roman power ... a cruel force that has dominated the people of Israel. Later, this very same empire will order the execution of Jesus. Jesus has a number of reasons to resist helping this centurion even when he is commended by the local leaders. From the perspective of many of Jesus' neighbors, this centurion represents everything that is wrong about the world.

And yet, Jesus accompanies them. He is willing to see this centurion. We don't learn why Jesus is so eager to help this Roman soldier ... we only learn that Jesus does not hesitate in the slightest to head toward his house. But on his way, another set of intermediaries enter the scene. The centurion sends friends to stop Jesus from coming inside his home. He recognizes that he is unworthy to host Jesus. This is a rather extraordinary display of humility and submission for a Roman military leader who is used to having his orders followed and never questioned.

Humility and power usually don't mix well as we know. A quick glance at most of our political leaders is proof positive of this. Most people endowed with power are not used to taking on postures of humility.

Jesus is dazzled by this centurion's faith ... marveling that such faith is not even found among God's chosen people. This is shocking. Why would Jesus praise a foreigner ... a Gentile ... a Roman centurion so highly?

Imagine for a moment if Jesus were to walk into this church and declare your enemies more faithful than you. Imagine for a moment if Jesus were to declare your oppressors more faithful than you. Imagine for a moment if Jesus declared a terrorist more faithful than you ... a criminal more faithful than you. This is how shocking Jesus' declaration would have been.

But if we've been paying attention to the Gospel of Luke, we shouldn't be so surprised. The foreigner and the stranger and our worst enemy are as welcome at God's table as anyone else is. After all, it was mere shepherds ... not the kings of the world ... who welcomed Jesus at his birth. When corrupt tax collectors ask John the Baptist what they should do ... how they should repent ... John does not tell them to stop being tax collectors. He tells them to stop taking advantage of their neighbors. When Roman soldiers come to John right after and ask him the same question, he doesn't tell them to lay down their swords but to execute their duties with honor. When Jesus preaches his first sermon, he points out that God sent God's prophet beyond the boundaries of Israel when hungry widows at home could use Elijah's help. He also reminds us that it was a foreign soldier who is cleansed of leprosy by Elisha.

This has happened before. God will not be restrained by the boundaries we draw around one another. God will surprise us. God will even enrage us when God's grace extends *even over* those we deem unworthy of such a gift. This has happened before, and it will happen again!

What then was the content of the centurion's faith? What did the centurion believe? What faith did Jesus see in him? The centurion believed and recognized Jesus' power over the forces of death. As a military officer, he surely understood well how powerful raw force could be. He knew how swords and masses of trained men can create massive destruction in their wake. He recognized such power in Jesus, but there was a difference in Jesus' power ... a difference that the centurion believed could make all the difference in the world. Military might cannot heal the sick or raise the dead. An army cannot heal his faithful servant. Imperial power cannot gain the affections of a people ... only their fear. Jesus' power is unlike that wielded by Rome or any other empire. Jesus' power heals peoples and communities ... it brings the powerful down from their thrones and lifts up the lowly. That is, Jesus' power turns the world upside down and inside out. That a centurion would recognize this power is the very essence of faith. Faith is seeing the world with God's eyes ... to see the possibilities of a world renewed by God's love and God's grace.

God regularly shows up where we don't expect God to be ... and never, ever stops delighting in surprising us ... through the unlikely people we least expect. I have to wonder if that's not part of the reason this story is shared by several of the Evangelists in the first place. I mean, just because this man is in the Roman legion doesn't mean that he is incapable of doing good things.

All of which means he is more complex than perhaps many of his day *or ours* want to make him out. He is a Roman centurion *and* a man who does good for those in his community. He is part of the force occupying and oppressing Israel *and* he builds synagogues for the townspeople under his authority. This passage reminds us that we should never reduce someone to one attribute ... or judge someone based on one element of who they are.

Pope Francis reminded us of that as well. During a homily at mass at the Vatican, the Pope said that all people are redeemed by Christ and invited his hearers to meet all people ... whether they believe or not ... at the place of doing good works. The fact that he included atheists among those who are redeemed by Christ ... and invited to do good works ... shocked many. But perhaps what we should be surprised at is not that unlikely and unexpected people demonstrate faith and do good works ... but that we consider them unlikely and unexpected in the first place.

After all, Jesus commends the faith of this Roman centurion ... and here's the mind-blowing element of the story ... even though we have no particularly good reason to believe that he ever becomes a follower of Jesus. I mean, he does not ask to follow Jesus ... or confess him as the Messiah ... or even seem particularly interested in meeting him. He simply sees in Jesus authority that he recognizes and, quite frankly, needs. Maybe he becomes a disciple ... maybe not. Neither Jesus nor Luke seem particularly interested. Instead, Jesus praises his astounding faith and Luke records it.

I'm willing to bet that almost every one of you knows *and* loves someone who isn't going to church ... or isn't particularly strong in their faith ... or isn't a Christian at all. I invite you to recognize that this person is also beloved of God ... that this person is also being used by God to do good things ... that this person may demonstrate faith that even Jesus would commend. Many of us, including me, love family members and friends whose relationship to the church is sketchy at best. Some of us have heard ... from the most conservative quarters of the church ... that if these folks don't believe they'll go to hell. But perhaps this Sunday we can hear a different voice ... a voice that merely points to this interaction between Jesus and the centurion ... and invites a comparison with some of the people that we know ... people that we love ... but do not believe as we do.

And now for a question ... might we pray for these folks this Sunday? Pray a prayer of thanksgiving that they are in our lives ... pray that God would use them to do God's will in the world (even if they wouldn't call it that) ... and pray that we would have the grace and courage to commend their good works and share with them our gratitude *for* them ... and our gratitude that God loves and uses them?

And could we pray one more prayer as well? Could we also pray that we might be less surprised that God uses people we have decided are unexpected or unlikely to do wonderful things? Could we pray that God would open our hearts and eyes to see that God's love ... will ... and work ... extends far beyond the confines of our church ... our faith ... and that the God who showed up in the man crucified on a cross regularly shows up where we don't expect God to be and never, ever stops delighting in surprising us? Could we pray that, too? I think if we can offer both these prayers we may reach a broad swath of people with a message of hope, faith and, finally, really good news.

Let us do so now ... in the silence of our hearts ... from the depths of our souls.