

Luke 7:1-10 ¹ After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ² A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly and who was ill and close to death. ³ When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. ⁴ When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy to have you do this for him, ⁵ for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." ⁶ And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; ⁷ therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸ For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me, and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." ⁹ When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and, turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." ¹⁰ When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

Luke 7:1-10

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"Even Jesus Was Amazed!"

Rev. Amy Terhune

First, I want to wish a very happy Father's Day to all those men out there that father their own kids, or serve as coaches, mentors, and teachers, fathering others who need it through the complexities of growing up. One of those fathers is Houston pastor John Bisango, who describes a time when his little girl, age 5, approached him and asked for a playhouse. John promptly nodded and promised to build her one, and then went back to working on his sermon. Soon, he glanced out the study window and saw her arms filled with her play dishes, toys, dolls, making trip after trip until she had amassed a significant pile of playthings in the yard. Calling to his wife, he inquired what his little girl was doing. "Oh," began his wife, "well, you promised to build her a play house and she believed you. She's just getting ready for it."

Ok, now how many dads have we got out there? Dads, what did he do? You've got it. John recalled later that it was like he'd been hit with a bomb. Leaving the sermon to the Holy Spirit, he rushed down to the hardware store for lumber and supplies in order to build that little girl a playhouse. Now why did he respond that way? Because she deserved it? No, not really. Because he didn't already have enough to do? Certainly not! Because he wanted to? No—well, not right then, he didn't. He did it because her daddy had given his word, she believed it and she acted on it. When he saw her faith, nothing could keep him from carrying out his word. [2 ¶s from John Bisango, *The Power of Positive Praying* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1965), 24; as adapted from "The Man of Faith" by Jim L Goforth, Jr; <http://sermons.logos.com/submissions/100983-Galatians-08-The-Man-of-Faith#content=/submissions/100983.>]

It is a natural human instinct to want to live up to the faith that others put in us. Whether it be our children, our parents, our employers, our teachers, our coaches, our pastors, our church, or our country, when someone expresses faith in our abilities and plans for the future based on the assumption that we will succeed, we, in turn, want to give our all and live up to that faith.

In this story from Luke, we have a Centurion—a local military commander—who is often held up as one of the greatest examples of faith. And indeed he is. He turns to a religious figure from a faith which is not his own, a member of a conquered people, giving his respect and his trust to what he has

never seen, believing that Jesus need not see or touch, but simply say the word from a distance and it will be so.

So let's start by looking at a single word. The word is *thaumazó*. It means surprised or astonished or even flabbergasted, and it appears more than 40 times in the New Testament alone. It describes shepherds in Bethlehem, crowds listening to Jesus teach, witnesses who experience Jesus' resurrection and many who hear of Jesus' message from the disciples who carry on his ministry. But only twice is *thaumazó* used to describe Jesus. The first is when he returns to his hometown of Nazareth to preach, and the folks can't see past the boy they knew. Scripture says Jesus is *thaumazó*—astonished at their lack of faith. The second is this morning. Jesus has been out teaching in a field beyond town. But word of his ability to heal has spread through Capernaum and this centurion hears the rumors. Yet Jesus never encounters the centurion looking to have a beloved slave healed. They never lay eyes on one another. Why? Because that centurion knows that Jesus doesn't have to see to heal, and he doesn't have to see to believe. And so, Jesus is *thaumazó*—amazed, not by lack of faith, but by faith's living depth in a man who isn't even part of Jesus' people.

The thing that immediately strikes me about this centurion is that he's kind. He's compassionate. He cares. He's a military officer with the Roman Army. That means that most of Jesus' followers would have considered him an enemy—part of the occupying force. He's the oppressor. But he doesn't act like an enemy. The fact that he cares about his slave is a fascinating detail. He wouldn't have to. Dr. Leith Anderson notes that, "...under Roman law, slaves were considered to be property. If he wanted to, an owner could kill his slave without any legal ramifications whatsoever. Sick slaves and old slaves were especially at risk. It was a frequent practice to just 'put them out' when they couldn't work any longer. This did not set them free; it meant they died on the street in desperation." [from <http://www.higherpraise.com/outlines/woodvale/Luke7a.htm>; as used in "Keys That Unlock Miracles" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] This centurion doesn't do that. He seems to care for those under him.

But he's also generous with a city that isn't his home and to a faith that isn't his own. He builds them a synagogue. He takes the time to learn their customs and their religious laws, which is why, when he hears that Jesus is one his way, he's not relieved but distressed, sending another delegation to stop Jesus before he arrives. Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. And Jesus, who has never been overly burden with scruples when it comes to Jewish purity laws, is astounded by the sensitivity and trust being demonstrated.

Kindness goes a long way in this world. And it can make all the difference in another's day or experience. I heard a beautiful story this week about a young dad who was a high school teacher out on the east coast. One cold winter day, he and his wife got the worst news imaginable – she was four months pregnant, and the baby had died in utero. After the miscarriage, his wife took time to recover, but he had to go back to work. Several of the students knew he was about to be a first-time dad, and he dreaded having to share the news of their loss. When he got to work Monday morning and flipped on the light to his classroom, he discovered hundreds of colored paper butterflies taped to the wall, each with a handwritten message of encouragement or sympathy on it from current and past students. Taking time to care is what heals the world.

The centurion was kind. He was also humble. The Jewish elders made a point of noting the many great things he'd done for them—that he was worthy of Jesus' favor. But he doesn't see it that way. He doesn't not claim worthiness any more than he lords his rank and position over his neighbors or his slaves. Humility is a precious commodity in today's world. To be sure, all of us sometimes need to advocate for ourselves in the world. But we must be wary of a sense of entitlement. Regardless of

what this man had done for Capernaum, he never viewed himself as 'entitled' to special favors from Jesus.

"There's a wonderful story about Dr. William Withering, who, during the 1770s, was one of the best doctors in England. In his village, several friends and neighbors were very ill with a disease called dropsy which caused pericardial effusion, where fluids would form around a person's heart, leading to a heart attack. He cared for them, but as good a doctor as he was, he had no way to treat them. So imagine his surprise when he suddenly saw several of them about town on market day looking healthy. They told him about a wonderful "witch woman" who lived in a nearby wood. This "good witch," they said, had prepared a special brew which, they insisted, had cured them.

"Now, Dr. Withering could have turned up his nose at this with condescension and arrogance, taking comfort in his degrees and his status and station. But if he had, he wouldn't have been a very compassionate doctor, nor would he have been a very good scientist. Fortunately, Dr. Withering was both. He was humble, and he knew the importance of investigating anything that sounded like a cure. He also knew that many remedies and herbal medicines used by midwives and women healers (who were often called witches) could help cure illness and heal injuries. So, he decided to visit the "witch" and see what brews she was concocting. Sure enough, when he got to her cottage, she was busy making up her dropsy remedy out of some twenty plants, roots, berries, and herbs. Dr. Withering asked for samples of many of her plants to study and after several tests, he decided that the most powerful plant in her brew had to be the herb foxglove. He thought, "What if there was something in the foxglove that cured the dropsy? And if so, what is it?"

"Thanks to the "good witch," who was a healer, Dr. Withering was able to use his knowledge of botany to isolate the ingredient in the foxglove plant called digitalis, which may well be one of the most important natural products ever discovered for medicinal use. Today, digitalis in different forms is still a lifesaver used by doctors all over the world to help people with heart problems. [3 ¶s from Dian Dincin Buchman & Seli Groves, WHAT IF, (New York: Scholastic Inc., 1988); as used in "Who Says A Good Man Is Hard To Find?" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

Dr. Withering's saving grace was humility. He was able to do good because he recognized that answers and solutions came from a wide array of sources. He didn't hold all the answer, and that was okay. He accepted that. In obedience to his call to heal, he reached out to unlikely sources for learning and discovery. The centurion understood that as well. He was humble enough to turn to one of a different faith, one even held suspect by other religious leaders, in order to seek healing for those he loved.

The centurion was kind to those beneath him. He was humble. And, though it may go without saying, he was faithful. He maintained a belief in something greater than himself. He was prepared to trust in what he could not explain. And when bad things came at him, he reached out, looking to encounter and experience the divine. Reaching into his own experience, the Centurion reasons that if those under him obey, then likewise, those under Jesus must obey. Just like the 5-year-old little girl, the Centurion acts on his faith. Jesus is amazed at such reasoning, and commends the Centurion for his faith. What is interesting here, that we modern readers often miss, is the reversal of roles that taking place here. The patron does not treat Jesus as one of his clients, who is obligated to serve him. Instead, scripture notes that he appeals to Jesus. He is humble and deferential, acknowledging by his behavior that Jesus is, in fact, the authority figure—the one with real power. He understood that trust in something greater than himself was not a weakness but a binding force that created relationship and community.

I'll close with a classic story about a mountain climber, who desperate to conquer the Aconcagua, initiated his climb after years of preparation. But he wanted the glory to himself, so he went up alone.

He started climbing, but eventually, it grew later and later, and it began to get dark. But rather than stopping to camp for the night, the climber decided to keep on going. Night fell thick and heavy at such a high altitude. Visibility was zero. Everything was black. There was no moon, and the stars were covered by clouds. As he was climbing a ridge at about 100 meters from the top, he slipped and fell. Falling rapidly he could only see blotches of darkness pass before him. He felt a terrible sensation of being sucked in by gravity. He kept falling....and in those anguishing moments, forgotten memories passed through his mind. He thought certainly he would die. But then he felt a jolt that almost tore him in half. Yes!! Like any good mountain climber he had staked himself with a long rope clipped to the harness about his waist. In those moments of stillness, suspended in the air he had no other choice but to shout, "HELP ME GOD! HELP ME!"

All of a sudden he heard a deep voice from heaven..."What do you want me to do?"

"SAVE ME"

"Do you really think that I can save you?"

"OF COURSE, MY GOD"

"Then unclip the rope from your harness that is holding you up."

There was another moment of silence and stillness. "WHAT?"

"Unclip the rope from your harness that is holding you up."

The man just held tighter to the rope. But as night fell hard, the temperature began to plummet, and the man became aware that his system was not going to be able to withstand the sub-zero temperatures all night long. He'd freeze to death before morning.

"Unclip the rope from your harness that is holding you up."

The man reasoned that he would rather die suddenly and be done with it than slowly freeze to death. And so, with fear and trembling, he unclipped the rope attached to his harness and fell again into mid-air. It did not last long, however. A split second later, he landed with an ungraceful but relatively harmless thud on solid ground. As he stood up in shock and disbelief, he conked his head on the metal clip at the end of the rope still dangling in mid-air off the mountain, and he realized with horror that he could have frozen death four feet off the ground. Four feet off the ground! [from "The Mountain Climber" on <http://www.zimbio.com>.]

Our mountain climber showed his faith in his real-life choices and actions. So did our centurion. What about us? Could we unclip the rope? Can you see the playhouse that isn't built yet? Can we be kind and humble? Can you see the cure from a distance, feel the peace in your spirit, follow your heart when it makes absolutely no sense to your brain or your friends or your family? I hear the words of Charles Spurgeon: When you cannot trace the master's hand, you'll have to trust the master's heart. May it be so. Amen.