

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, February 9, 2025

As we prepare to hear God's word read and proclaimed, let us join in prayer together.

You are as close to us as our next breath, oh God, so come, come gently amongst us this day. Come with your peace and with your comfort. Come also with your challenge and your encouragement. As your word is read and proclaimed this day, may it speak to us in the ways that you deem right and good. May it comfort us and call us forth. For we ask it in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Hopefully, you were with us last Sunday as we welcomed Reverend Dr. Victor Aloyo, the president of Columbia Seminary, here to this pulpit. If you weren't we really commend you to go on to our YouTube channel. You can see his proclamation of the word there. It helped us begin our sermon series that'll run for the rest of this month, entitled Jesus Heals. We trust and we believe that the God that we know in Christ Jesus is one who is about the work of healing, healing in our lives, in our communities, and in the world. We continue that series this morning as we turn to Luke 7, verses 1 through 10. Let's listen together for God's word to each of us and to the church this day.

After Jesus finished presenting all his words among the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion had a servant who was very important to him, but the servant was ill and about to die. When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to Jesus to ask him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they earnestly pleaded with Jesus. "He deserves to have you do this for him," they said. "He loves our people and he built our synagogue for us." Jesus went with them. He had almost reached the house when the centurion sent friends to say to Jesus, "Lord, don't be bothered. I don't deserve to have you come under my roof. In fact, I didn't even consider myself worthy to come to you. Just say the word and my servant will be healed. I'm also a man appointed under authority, with soldiers under me. I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and the servant does it." When Jesus heard these words, he was impressed with the centurion. He turned to the crowd following him and said, "I tell you, even in Israel I haven't found faith like this." When the centurion's friends returned to his house, they found the servant restored to health.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So we'll find this week and next that Luke likes to pair stories of healing. In the Gospel of Luke we will often find stories of healing back to back, paired up. Now for the purpose of our sermon series we are breaking them up, but what we need to know is that there is a thread that is being

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woven through each of them. Luke has a purpose, not simply in the particularities of one story of healing, but in the arc of this story, that we will unpack together over the next few weeks. There is a purpose in us understanding the connectedness between all of these healing events. Let's get to the particularities of this one, though. A centurion we know to have been an officer in the Roman military, one that you might have derived had charge over a 100 men. We know that Capernaum was on the pioneer front of the Roman Empire, so this particular centurion was almost as far away as one could be from the capital of the Empire. Make no mistake. the centurion served the Empire, though, and perhaps you, like me, have grown in our tradition to be skeptical of those with privilege and power. Rightly so, the gospels call us to be skeptical of privilege and power, and yet this centurion is painted in a much different light. Even in spite of or maybe even because of his position, we might be skeptical of him, and yet he sends a dispatch of the Jewish community toward Jesus after he's heard that there is one moving through the land that is healing people. He sends a small group of them, and they speak well of him. They say that he is a man of high character. It is, in fact, the first thing they say to Jesus when they get to him. Now he hasn't instructed them to do this, but they start off by saying, "This man, this centurion, deserves to have you do this healing for him. He loves our people. He even built our synagogue for us." So on the one hand we have the right and well derived skepticism of the powerful and the privileged, and on the other hand we hear the testimony of those who know him—that he is a man of high character. If anything this passage seems to reveal to us something that we on some level know to be true already, that we are indeed a complex people. It seems to indict any surface level judgment that we might have because of someone's position. What the centurion reveals to us is that he's not simply one thing. Although he is an agent of the Empire, he's also someone that through generosity has built the community a place to worship God. He is human too. The thread that we'll see next week as we unpack the Widow of Nain story, the raising that happens there by Jesus's power is that illness and death are the great equalizers. They were then and they are now. What we see in the connection and we'll see later on this week is that when we are in deep need or one that we know and love is in deep need, even near death, all of those privileges and all of those powers seem to go away, not necessarily in the world in the way that our society is constructed. We receive different health care most certainly, but in the way that we are seen before God, we are all stripped to bare. That's what illness and death do to us.

So the Centurion sends a group of the Jews to Jesus, and what is the first thing they say? They say he deserves this because of what he's done for us. Notice the centurion didn't ask them to petition Jesus in this way. The people commend him to Jesus for all of his good works, but he does not commend himself. Even later on when we read in the text of his own words, he doesn't lift up before that he has been generous in this way. Others speak of his high qualities to justify him before Jesus, but the centurion does not appeal to any of those when he makes his request of

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Jesus. In fact, he ends up saying, "I am unworthy for you to come under my roof." What would bring about such humility? Certainly not his position, certainly not any of the propaganda that the Empire would push upon him and press upon the people. So what would? My holy imagination tells me something has, and if it's good and humbling and if this one is bearing the fruit of humility, then it must be born of God. My holy imagination tells me that this man at some point in his life, whether on the battlefield or whether at home or whether amongst his family, this man has experienced healing. He knows its power, and because he knows its power, he wants it to be experienced. He wants one that he loves to experience it too.

In my holy imagination there's this phrase that rolls around. Y'all probably heard the one that hurt people hurt people. Y'all have heard that before. Hurt people hurt people. It's a good maxim for us to hold. Healed people...healed people heal people as well. Let me say that again. Healed people heal people. They've done the work or experienced what it is like to be healed. They want to be about that work in the world. If you've been privileged enough to sit in an AA meeting or an Al-Anon meeting in the midst of brokenness, and someone has spoken across a circle to you from their place of healing that ongoing work, then you know the measure of healing that it can provide to you. If you sat across from a good friend who's done their work or maybe even had an experience of the Living God, you know that those who are...have been healed can heal as well. It is not the centurion's worthiness, not his worldly accomplishments or his generosity that qualify him before God to be healed. It is only Christ's power. Notice that while he doesn't laud his character or his charity, he does speak about the dynamics of authority. In verse 8. "I am also a man appointed under authority with soldiers under me. (We know that to be a hundred.) I say to one 'go' and he goes, another 'come' and he comes. I say to my servant 'do this,' and the servant does it." Beyond one who I imagine was healed, this man does understand authority, but the dimension of authority that I'm most appreciative that he understands is that he is keenly aware of where his authority ends and God's begins. He has been gifted worldly authority, but when it comes to healing the heart of his servant...the body of his servant, he understands that no commissioning from the Empire can make that happen, only a loving and powerful God. And so the power of God becomes manifest in this story through healing, and not the kind where Jesus goes into the home and puts his hand upon the servant, not that kind. This is a different kind. This doesn't even take place incarnate with the one who is ill, close to death. This is done from a distance. The one who is healed may not even know the one who has healed him. They may never cross paths, but the healing is the same.

Last week Dr. Aloyo preached a powerful word, but he also revealed something to me. When prompted or encouraged y'all actually can say Amen. All right, so let's try it.

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We worship a God who heals. Amen.

Jesus looks with compassion upon this servant but also upon you and upon our world. Amen.

Jesus doesn't in this moment look away from your pain, look away from the pain of the servant or even of the centurion. He doesn't look away from the pain of the world. He doesn't pretend not to see it or that it doesn't exist. Jesus gets about the work of healing. The key here for us is that the healing power of Jesus is both a comfort and a call. The fact that Jesus heals ought to comfort us and call us. Let me explain. Maybe you are the one this day who stumbled in here in need of healing. Maybe it's something that's going on in your married life or in your partnership. Maybe it's something that's been nagging you at work. Maybe you had an unexpected change in your vocational life. Maybe there's something that's been woven into the fabric of your family system that can't seem to be unwound, and it needs to be healed. Maybe there's a way that you are parenting right now or being parented that is hurting and needs healing. Maybe you are carrying with you grief from one that you have lost, who meant the world to you. Or maybe you are carrying with you fear for the world in which we live now.

If you are, if you are in one of those places this day, if you've carried any of that hurt with you to this place, then maybe you need to know that Jesus is your Advocate today. Maybe you are the one who is like the servant who is in need of healing, and you simply need to know that you are not alone. If that is the case, then you need to know this day that Jesus is working to heal and make new.

Jesus is about the work of healing. We see it in scripture over and over and over again. If you need to hear it more clearly, Jesus is working within you to heal you. Amen.

Or maybe you are the centurion. Maybe you are the one with power and privilege. Maybe you're the one who is not simply in need of healing right now, but you love someone who is. Maybe you love someone who is navigating addiction, navigating all sorts of different things in their relational life or in their work life. Maybe it's your faith that needs healing or the faith of someone that you deeply love. Maybe you are called to be the centurion today, the one who advocates for another who is in need of healing.

Maybe you are being called this day to risk believing on behalf of another that healing is possible. The beautiful thing about this story is that the centurion gets to participate even from a distance in the healing of the servant simply by asking, simply by petitioning Jesus the Christ to be about the work that Jesus wants to be about in the world and in this person's life as well.

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Maybe you are being called this day. Maybe you've been walking with somebody and you've been trying to will their own healing; and maybe you need to know, like the centurion discovered, that where your power ends, that is where the healing power of Christ begins. Whether you carry the burdens with you or whether you are carrying them with a friend today, what is undeniable is the need for healing, which makes the good news that much more beautiful and lifegiving and hopeful. The God that we know in Jesus Christ heals. So may you know it to be true for you this day. May you know it to be true for those whom you love. May you proclaim it and carry that power with you out into a world deeply in need of that healing power.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.