

## ***The Broadness of God's Grace!@***

**Luke 7:1-10**

**May 29, 2016**

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Have you ever gone to a party uninvited? Crashed a party, maybe? Verlee Copeland, who wrote a commentary on this passage in ***Feasting on the Word***, tells a story on herself about a time when she had been invited to an early evening reception for a board she served on. The host was new to the community and Verlee had never been to her house.

She writes: "Following the directions on the printed invitation, I pulled up uncharacteristically early in front of a stately home in an unfamiliar neighborhood and parked. The address was not posted on the house, but the host had described the house to me.

Walking up to the front door, I rang the bell. Seeing others in the kitchen I walked in and through to the back of the house, and introduced myself to those gathering for evening refreshment. After a few minutes of chitchat, it dawned on me that they had no idea what I was doing in their kitchen. 'This is not the Smith house, is it?' I said. 'No,' they replied, 'the Smith's live next door.' Each of them, Verlee writes, had been afraid to ask me why I was intruding, for fear that one of the other family members had invited me to their table and forgot to mention it."

The gospel (or the good news) according to Luke is very often about how God surprises us with the broadness of his grace, which extends to unexpected guests. Luke, who was a physician and, many scholars believe a Syrian from Antioch, which means he was a Gentile, not a Jew, tells the stories of Jesus' reaching out to those who were not considered the chosen people of God – the Israelites – the Jewish nation.

Today's story is a great example! From so many stories we've read about the Romans and how cruel they were to the Jews, it's a surprise to read this story about a Roman Centurion whom the Jews liked and highly recommended to Jesus. The centurion was a commander in the military of Herod and was equal to a high-ranking sergeant in our military. He had great authority over many people.

This particular centurion was unusual in that he seemed to have a genuine, mutual friendship with the Jewish people. He seemed to be one who had a respect for their religion, perhaps following much of what they believed. In fact, the elders whom he sends to Jesus on his behalf, tell Jesus that he is trustworthy and kind; he even built the synagogue where they worshiped.

So here is this Roman soldier, a man of great authority over many people, who has a slave that he obviously cares for. We could question his motive - does he want Jesus to heal this slave because of the slave's value to him as a servant? Does he just not want to lose the great hard work of this slave? Or does he really, genuinely care for this slave?

William Barclay, writes that the centurion had a very unusual attitude toward his slave. "In Roman law," Barclay writes, "a slave was defined as a living tool; he had no rights; a master could ill-treat him and even kill him if he chose.

"A Roman writer on estate management recommends the farmer to examine his implements every year and to throw out those which are old and broken, and to do the same with his slaves. Normally, when a slave was past his work he was thrown out to die." It seems, then, that this Roman soldier did truly care for his slave.

The way Luke tells this story, we almost forget that the Roman centurion is never actually present. Neither is his slave. Instead, the centurion sends friends – Jewish elders, amazingly – to advocate on his behalf. They come to Jesus, speaking good words for this soldier, asking that Jesus would come and heal his slave.

And Jesus heads towards the home of the centurion but not long before he gets there, again, the centurion sends people to speak for him. They give Jesus this message that is directly from the soldier. "Don't trouble yourself to come to my house, Lord. I'm not worthy of having you in my home, under my roof. Just speak the word and my servant will be healed."

Here we have this example of a Roman respecting the laws of the Jewish religion, which says the Jews should not associate with or visit the house of a Gentile. This man – a man of great authority – who commands people to go here and there; to do whatever he says and they obey – is not only respecting the Jewish tradition but says he is unworthy of Jesus being in his presence – under his roof. And yet, he believes in Jesus; he has faith that all Jesus has to do is speak the words of healing and his servant will be healed. He is saying that Jesus has the ultimate authority – much more authority than he does. In a way, he is putting himself as a slave to Jesus' authority.

And Luke tells us that when they returned, the slave was healed. But we also hear that Jesus was amazed at the faith of this Gentile man. In fact, he says he has not found anyone in all of Israel who has a faith like this, which is quite a statement considering that most of Israel thought they had the hold on the real faith as the chosen people.

And so we come to the great question that every sermon should address. So what? What does this say or mean for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Where is the good news in this story from Luke for you and me? How is it relevant to our lives today?

I think this passage actually has a lot to say to us. First, we have a tendency to think of our faith as being very personal. In one of the churches where I served, I talked in a sermon about sharing our faith with others; about telling our friends and neighbors and strangers about how God loves us, loves them.

But the feedback I got afterwards was that their faith was personal, not something they could talk about. My question is where in the gospels does Jesus say, go out and keep this good news to yourselves? Keep it a secret. It is too personal for you to share.

Now, real faith is a faith that is embedded deeply in our individual hearts. It is personal in that we each have a relationship with Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit. It is personal in that we have these conversations with God that can be all about our individual concerns, as well as the concerns of our loved ones. It is personal in that we have experienced forgiveness on a very personal level and we have a deep love for our Savior because of the salvation he has given us through his death and resurrection.

But a living faith is a faith that goes from deep in our hearts outward to those around us; a faith that is to be shared and spread like wildfire. Our faith is so enmeshed within community. It becomes so much more alive when we are a part of community.

This story of the Gentile who amazes Jesus with his deep faith includes the witness of a community of people whom Jesus turns to and points out how this faith that is so strong. And he's not even an Israelite!

Community is so important. It is through the community of faith that we carry each other before Jesus. It is through community that we have vision and strength to help one another and further the mission of Christ. It is through community that our worship becomes many voices raising the roof with joy and praise. The witness of community is one of the points Luke is making here in this story. Community is important. It was for them, and it is for us as well. And it is good news that the community can be large or small but together we are the Body of Christ and we count in the larger realm of things, in Jesus' eyes.

But here is the best good news of all. After being a pastor for 20 years – part of that time talking to patients in hospitals, working with youth who have so many things on their minds and hearts – and just being with parishioners who share things with me as their pastor that they might not share with many others – I am convinced that the majority of us have lots of little insecurities.

We have something deep inside that causes us to wonder if we are worthy of good things from God. We sometimes feel like we don't belong; we aren't good enough or knowledgeable enough, or religious enough to really deserve God's forgiveness and grace.

As a young woman just about to graduate from high school, I once went to my pastor and said that I believed in forgiveness, but I just couldn't accept that God would forgive me. I somehow felt that I was the one person in the world who could not be forgiven. (And don't worry, I really hadn't done anything too bad. I just had a very healthy – or at least a hefty – sense of guilt.) Reverend Muncy pointed out that I was making light of Jesus' suffering and death, if I couldn't accept that I am included among the forgiven.

Imagine this man in Luke's story who was a strong man of authority – a man who was ethical and caring – this man didn't not feel he was worthy either. He was not one of the chosen. He was not a member of the Jewish race or religion. Yet, even though he was a Gentile, Jesus showed him grace and love.

But, there is more good news! Here was a slave – a Gentile slave who was in the lowest status of all society. He was considered nothing by many people; someone who could easily be thrown away and forgotten. And we have no idea whether or not he had any faith. We don't

know if he even had a clue as to who Jesus was. But the love of God – the grace of God is so broad and far reaching that, even without Jesus ever seeing him or putting his hands on this slave – he was healed.

Friends, the good news for us is that we are counted as worthy in the eyes of God; that God sent his Son, Jesus, to offer healing and grace and forgiveness and love to all, not just a certain group; not just for those who are really sure or extra nice; not just to those who know the bible front and back. God's love extends so far that it has reached up into the 21<sup>st</sup> century to all of us Gentiles who aren't always sure of ourselves or our faith or just what the heck we're doing.

And those who think they are better; those who judge us, or others, they will see – eventually – that God is for all. Luke goes to great lengths to show us that. God's love extends to the uninvited guests. The ones who are considered to be gate-crashers, unworthy to attend the party – they are the very ones who are offered God's healing and grace.

You are loved. You are part of the community of faith. You are a member of the family of God – cherished and loved and treasured and made worthy by the very blood of Christ that was shed on the cross, not just for the Jews, but for us as well. We are counted among the saved.

And I happen to think that is very, very good news!

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