

Measures of Worth

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Third Presbyterian Church
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Luke 7:1-10

One of the things I love about the Gospel accounts is not only that they are full of good stories, but the way these stories are put together to create a distinct narrative arc – one big theological story. John Drury calls Luke “a storyteller perfectly in charge of his matter.”¹

And one of the challenges we have when we work with a small story is that it’s always part of a much bigger story. That small story always illuminates and teases out some aspect of the larger story – the larger Jesus story.

Today is no exception. At the outset of today’s Gospel story, Jesus has just given a 30-verse sermon, his so-called “Sermon on the Plain,” teachings on how to live and participate in the Kingdom of God.

At that scene, I can almost imagine a rock concert-like atmosphere (minus a few substances). Throngs of people had flocked to hear him, and be healed of their diseases, and cured of their unclean spirits. They had all been trying to touch him, to tap into the power that he had to heal them. And to that mass of humanity Jesus had said things both inspire and make us uncomfortable: things like, “Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; do not judge others.” This is what happens in the Kingdom of God.

And then Luke shows us what this looks like in person. That’s today’s story - when a group of Jewish elders come to tell Jesus that of all people, a local centurion seeks his help.

Now, whenever we enter a Scripture story, it’s by definition a cross-cultural undertaking. One word can convey a whole lot of meaning, but if we’re not part of that time and place and culture, we can miss all of the rich texture. So let’s unpack today’s scene.

The slave of a certain centurion is on his deathbed. We don’t know anything about the slave, but cultural anthropologists help us understand the possibilities. He could have been born into slavery, or captured by professional slavers. He could have been a prisoner of war. He could have sold himself or been sold by others to pay off a debt. He might have stood on an auction platform to be pushed and poked while on display. He could have served any number of roles for the centurion – a domestic or a guardian; he could have had specialized training, or even been given great responsibility. He might have been personally close to his master.² All of these are possibilities evoked when we talk about slaves in the first century world.

But we don’t know which of those it was. All the text tells us is that the centurion valued him highly. Whether he valued his slave as property, or whether he valued him personally – we really don’t know his motives. Did he care only because he’d suffer financial loss if his slave died? Or did he care because they’d developed a relationship of trust? We don’t know. The story simply tells us that when the slave became deathly ill, this military man valued him enough to intervene on his behalf.

¹ John Drury, “Luke,” *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, 1987, p. 418-419

² Description based on James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*, 1999, p. 221-236.

So the centurion seeks Jesus' help. Now, a ranking officer in the occupying army – the army of Herod Antipas - is not quite who one would expect to seek him out. The master sergeant of his day, he had risen through the ranks to a position of responsibility and some measure of influence, a position to which rank and file soldiers aspired. He occupied the highest rank open to them. But he was part of the occupying military force. He could lead security patrols; he could even lead execution squads. If he had attended his senior awards night, he would be an unlikely candidate to win “most likely to ask Jesus for help.”

Yet, like all of us, he is more than a one-dimensional person.³ Even though the local Jews were subject to his authority; he built them a synagogue; he used his power to do a good thing for them, and under the societal norms of the day, would expect them to return the favor in some way.

And, he also loved them. A **centurion** loved them. So here is a complex human being – not an exaggerated caricature of a dim-witted enemy officer in a sit-com, but a complex human being who both represented an outside oppressive regime and who also did some good.

The centurion reflects the contradictory lives we all lead. We are both at our best and at our worst. Even as we care about our neighbor, we are part of and even perpetuate larger systems that disadvantage or ignore countless people, We enjoy privilege by virtue of our skin color, or social class, or gender, or education level. We even use that privilege to help others, even as that privilege leaves them out. Even when we do good, we often do it badly with harmful consequences. We know this about ourselves; and when we forget, something happens to remind us that we are not worthy of what we ask of Jesus.

One senses from the text that this centurion knew about his own contradictions. Here is an officer who heard about Jesus and is willing to defy religious and social and cultural convention to seek help for his slave.

But how? How do you approach someone you don't know? Even more so, how do you approach someone when there's nothing about you that merits their attention? You send someone who does – someone who they respect, someone who 'speaks their language,' both literally and figuratively.

We do this all the time – in our businesses, in our places of work, in our dealings in the community, especially when we're asking for something. We use our connections. We figure out who knows whom, whose word will be trusted, who has an in with someone, especially if they're in some position of power.

You want to talk to the mayor or your legislator or a potential funder for your particular cause? You want to sign on supporters? You want to win a contract you've bid on? This is how the world works - you have a better chance of success with someone who already has a relationship with them. This is exactly what the centurion does. He asks others – in this case, the Jewish elders – to intercede with Jesus on behalf of his slave, because he knows his human power is far inferior to Jesus' life-giving power.

In and of itself, that is a powerful thing. It's one thing that church is for – the ministry of intercession, a church full of unworthy, inconsistent, wounded and broken people interceding in prayer on behalf of others who are wounded and broken in body, mind, or spirit. I'm grateful for people who really take the ministry of intercessory prayer seriously and spend much time doing just that, like Martha and our Deacons who offer intercessory prayer every Sunday morning at 10:00 in the chapel.

³ Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 2001, p. 100-101

And we do that at every worship service during Prayers of the People. It's one of the things that makes church different from just any secular social service agency down the street. We intercede on behalf of others because it matters. We do it because it's ministry. We intercede on behalf of the church universal; we intercede on behalf of those in need, and of those in authority to seek justice and peace; we intercede on behalf of our communities and their leaders to do what's right.

And I've been reminded that we even need to pray on behalf of others who are unable to pray for themselves. We talked about this recently at Thursday Voices. In an article by Rodney Clapp, he told of two of his closest friends who'd suffered through the worst year of their lives – with deeply troubling family problems. They experienced so much that God felt absent to them, and they could not pray. So in great compassion, Clapp promised to redouble his own prayers for them, praying in their stead, because life was so hard they just couldn't do it. He acted in faith, he prayed in faith, for them. It's an aspect of prayer that I've come to increasingly reflect on.

It's what the Apostle Paul says Jesus Christ and Holy Spirit do for us - the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And Christ Jesus, who is at the right hand of God, intercedes for us.

I also think advocacy is a form of intercession - intercession in the public sphere. It's something to which Third Church is making an increased commitment. In April, I attended Ecumenical Advocacy Days in Washington, DC, which highlighted the ways our collective witness as people of faith can impact our communities. The weekend highlighted the dynamics of race and class and power – nationally, and internationally.

Now, I'll be honest. Years ago I would not have imagined that advocacy work would be on my radar screen, because my image of it was narrowly limited to one of marching in protests and carrying big signs, and I never saw myself as a sign-waver. Don't get me wrong – there are most definitely times and places for that, and I may even do more of it one day!

But the work of advocacy grounded in Scripture's call to work for justice and peace is more than a march and a sign. It's informed work. I've come to appreciate the invaluable efforts of those who analyze policies and articulate alternatives with a view towards people who are underserved – people without social, or economic, or corporate, or political power.

In Washington, Rev. Dr. William Barber, initiator of Moral Mondays in North Carolina, powerfully preached on the intersection of faith and advocacy. And with the flair and conscience-stoking substance that only a great preacher in the black church tradition can offer, he reminded us that there would have been no movement to abolish slavery in the United States without people who were serious about the Word of God. "We need to get out of the safety of the sanctuary to stand with people demanding justice," he said. In other words, intercession in the public sphere.

Similarly, Ashindi Maxton said that thinking intersectionally where policy and spirituality meet – that can be a game changer as we seek to extend God's Kingdom work.

So I wonder, like Margaret Lamotte Torrence, where can we imagine ways to give voice to the longings and perspectives of those who stand outside our communities, but also long to know God's mercy and healing? A place to begin might be with something we're passionate about.

A couple of years ago, people from this congregation and from our fellow urban Presbyterian churches who were passionate about education made a difference for children traumatized by poverty when they went to school board meetings to advocate for a social worker in every school. And they helped make it happen.

For many advocating for equity in education, or for reasonable gun laws, or hunger programs, or mental health needs, or LGBTQ rights, the work means things that warm the hearts of geeks everywhere – policy analyses and research studies in one hand and the theological lens of Scripture in the other. Doing the hard work, the homework, asking questions, looking at the world through Jesus-shaped lenses and interceding accordingly with those who have the power to make changes – not because we are worthy, but because we are called by the One who is merciful to us.

The centurion knew this about himself. For all the authority he had in his sphere of influence, he knew he was not worthy to approach someone like Jesus, even if he was asking on his slave's behalf. Yet he had faith enough to send not one, but two groups of people to intercede on his own behalf. He had faith enough to recognize that Jesus didn't even need to come to his house to heal his servant. Just say the word. Say the word.

But as much as this story is about the centurion, and his slave, and all of the envoys and go-betweens who carried the messages, this story is even more so part of the larger story of Jesus, the story that Luke continues to tell. This is the story of Jesus, who used his power to extend mercy and healing and grace to the slave, and even to the centurion, and his delegations, in the midst of all their unworthiness. This is the story of Jesus, who extends mercy and healing and grace to the whole world, even to us, in all our unworthiness. This is the story of Jesus, who even now intercedes on our behalf. Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God. Amen.