

Second Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, May 29, 2016, Year C

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 7:1-11

“But Say the Word...”

Many of you know that I grew up as a Roman Catholic and I became very familiar with the part of the Mass, as an Altar Boy, having to originally learn Latin, and it was before the Second Vatican Council, when the Mass was in Latin, and when it changed to English – a part of the service spoke to me. Just before Communion – in our service the priest says “the gifts of God for the people of God; take them in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on Him in your heart by faith with thanksgiving. These are the words that the priest says in the Catholic Mass: “This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper.” We happen to sing about the Lamb of God, but the people would respond “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.” These humbling words remind me that Jesus is the **only means of salvation**, mine and yours, and that just as during Creation – **His Word is all encompassing**, all healing and all forgiving. That was the message yesterday at Sue Barfield’s funeral. Sue, as many of you know, earnestly believed in the Red Letters – Jesus’ Words – the red letters as marked in the Bible – you can take to the bank! They are unaltered, unadulterated truth, and that when Jesus said on the night before He died “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me*” – that is the truth! Again, – His Word is all encompassing, all healing and all forgiving. The only humble enough response to be fitting of Jesus’ invitation – is to accept. True, we are not worthy, yet through an act of Jesus’ grace and mercy we are made suitable to receive His “real presence.”

In today’s Holy Gospel from Luke 7, and also recorded in Matthew 8, we find true humility in a person of non-Jewish faith – a Gentile – a Roman Centurion, who highly valued his servant and is saddened because his servant is near death. Based on what he does – it is clear that the Centurion really cares for this servant. The role of a Centurion in the Roman Army was as an officer – leading at least 100 men, and possibly a legion. They were most definitely familiar with authority structures, giving and receiving respect.

In each of our lives there are always people that we respect; in our places of business, there are people whose decisions we accept and go along with, and whose instructions or even orders we obediently carry out. But we can then make the huge mistake of thinking that God’s authority is like those we encounter in our lives. We run the risk sometimes of trying to minimize God’s power and authority; we try to put God in OUR box, so that we can try to figure out just how big He is. Remember – He is bigger than the universe. If we see God’s authority, in Jesus Christ, as any less absolute than that of a military officer, we are, according to this scripture passage, not only mistaken but also lacking faith itself. We cannot limit God’s authority.

The heart of this account is not the healing of the servant; of course it is important, because without it there would be no reason for the Centurion to seek Jesus, but it’s just the means for what God wants us to see. What truly matters is the Centurion’s faith. Here he was, a ranking

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military officer, stationed in Capernaum, where Jesus had made His home base, and where Peter lived. Ironically, right after this Gospel lesson – Jesus goes to Peter’s house and heals Peter’s mother-in-law. Isn’t it amazing how everything ties together? Jesus is in Capernaum and we are told that this man cared so much about the city in which he lived that he helped to build, if not built the synagogue. Part of that synagogue stands today, as the base – and the fourth century synagogue built on top of it. It is truly amazing to see a man, a non-Jew, giving of himself for Yahweh’s people.

This Centurion would probably be receiving orders on a regular basis from his commanding officer, who was most likely in Caesarea, about fifty miles away on the Mediterranean. His soldiers were probably performing peace-keeping; like police officers. There are accounts, like Josephus, the famed historian, who tells of soldiers in that position seeing the local people as inferior, but here this man didn’t. He honored their traditions and he honored them as a people. He had come to love and respect the Jewish people, and had even paid for the building of the local synagogue. Here was a humble Gentile, looking at Israel and the God of Israel and apparently liking what he was seeing, and opening himself to learning new truth from this ancient way of life. Luke emphasizes the Centurion’s respect and humility, sending two groups of messengers to speak with Jesus. Jesus is amazed at the second message. We read time after time in the Gospels where Jesus does and says things that amaze people; and this is one of the few places in the Gospel where Jesus Himself is amazed. Jesus is amazed at the sheer quality of the man’s faith. This faith is the simple; the simple, clear belief that when Jesus commands that something be done, it will be done. He is treating Jesus like a superior officer, who has authority over sickness and health. He believes that if Jesus says that someone is to get well, they will. It is that simple, right? We do not know where he got his faith from, we don’t know. If he had lived in Capernaum for a while, he had probably heard of Jesus and might have even seen Him perform miraculous cures, and casting out of demons. He may have witnessed that Jesus had an incredible power. He looked at Jesus and was prepared to risk more than any Jews had done, and declaring that God was at work in Him. This man had grasped the very center of the Jewish faith: that the one true God, the God of Israel, was the sovereign one, the Lord of heaven and earth. The incredible thing is that he understood that this one true God was personally present and active in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

We can see this man as a model for all those non-Jews who will come to faith, to share the blessings of healing and salvation that can only come from Jesus Himself. The man has a faith that Jesus hasn’t found among His own people. ‘Faith’ is defined here, as something much more specific: recognizing that Jesus possesses authority. Faith like that brings its own reward. As he has believed, so it happens.

I must say to you today that I have seen and witnessed God’s working through His people and through the faith of His people to deliver healings to those who believe that God wants to heal His people.

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- Back in 1971, on July 27th, my father had had surgery on his leg for an aneurism bypass, and because he had heart problems from the time he was a youth – they put him in the ICU. That day is my mother’s birthday and she went by herself over to Mercy Hospital to visit my father. As she walked into the ICU the alarms went off. People were running and she asked what had happened and someone said “this old guy in the back just died.” The “old guy in the back” was my father! They gathered around him, and they asked her and everyone else to leave. They gathered around him, and we prayed. My father was restored to life, but the doctor met with us and told us that Dad was going to have to leave Long Island and go to the Cleveland Clinic to have multiple bypass surgeries on his heart. We prayed like we have never prayed before as a family, and three days later the doctor met with us again and said “I cannot understand this, I cannot explain it, but there is now no problem with your father’s heart.” “Forget about Cleveland; it is pumping and beating and processing normally.” God answers prayers; again – God wants to heal His people.
- Back in 1999 I could barely use my right leg. I had a hip replacement in my right leg and there was some serious nerve damage. I had seven epidurals, none of which worked for more than a few weeks, and so we went on a trip with our family to Israel. I knew my limitations and that I would not be able to go to some places because I could barely climb steps. The night before we left the Galilee to go south toward the Dead Sea, we met on the shore of the Galilee and prayed, sang songs of worship; Lord I Lift Your Name on High, and other songs that just glorify God. Somebody said that there is someone here who needs to be prayed for. He got up, came over to me and laid a hand on my shoulder, and soon everyone else was doing the same – and prayed. It was during this time that I knew that somehow I was going to be healed. The very next day our second stop was at the Jordan River, at the traditional Baptism site called Yardenit. Marilyn and I got the white gowns and went into the water (our kids did not want to do that). Marilyn went under and came back up, and next it was my turn. When I went under and came back up – everybody and everything was bathed in a bright white light, and my leg started to burn, went numb and the pain has been gone ever since, and continues to be gone in that type of pain in that leg. I was prayed over and I knew that that I knew, that I knew that I knew that God’s healing would be real!
- I witnessed a priest gather with fellow believers to release a troubling spirit from a young lady. Her life was changed forever – free from that spirit – because of the faith of her and the people that were present.
- During a healing service I prayed along with a man’s children for their father who was told he was going to lose his foot. We laid hands on him and could feel the swelling relieved almost instantaneously. That man was healed completely by God – through his faith and ours as well. That man now practices lacrosse with his son. God is SO good!
- At a youth revival called Joshua Revolution in Niagara Falls, NY – I was asked as one of the local pastors to be on the prayer team. People would come up and ask to be prayed for, and we would gather and pray. This young man came up on crutches, and several of his friends came with him. He had injured his knee; this was a swimmer who loved to

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compete. He tearfully came forward and asked if Jesus would take away his pain and “fix his knee!” I had him sit down and asked permission to put my hands on his knee, while others put their hands on his shoulders – this knee was not pretty – but as we prayed for him, the knee started to change. Something was going on inside that knee; you could feel the swelling reduce and he started to cry with joy. Here is the best part – the next morning after breakfast he was without his crutches and actually running in the auditorium. God loves to heal those who believe in Him!

I don't for one minute think that I have any power, but I was blessed to be a witness to the power of Almighty God working through the faith of His people.

So let me ask you this; what does it mean to recognize, and submit to, the authority of Jesus? What does it mean to call him ‘Lord’ and live by that? Faith means believing that the living God has entrusted his authority to His Son, Jesus Christ, who is now exercising it for the salvation of the world. The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 10:17 “*Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.*” In each of these cases, Jesus rewarded the believer who knew, that they knew, that they knew - that God would work a wonder in their lives.

That day in Capernaum, Jesus knew that believing Gentiles would soon be “grafted in” to the Kingdom of God and He saw this man's faith as an advance sign of it happening. Romans 11:17 speaks of believers, Gentiles being ‘grafted in’ to the root; the root of Jesse – Jesse being the father of David. The believing Gentiles would be joined with the patriarchs, the great ancestors of Israel, as adopted sons of God – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as the Scriptures had foretold, by a great multitude from around the world; Jesus also knew that many of God's Chosen People would refuse to believe. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was sent into the world for the people of the world – and He wants all people to come to faith. How awesome to see the example that through the faith of the Centurion his servant was healed and made well. His message to Jesus says it all “*But say the word, and my servant will be healed.*” (Luke 7:7)