

“But Say The Word”  
(Luke 7:1-10)  
Pastor Espinosa

Verse 7: “[The centurion said] Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. It is rather an incredible event that once upon a time God marveled at a human being. Just try to picture that God who created the heavens and the earth said, “Wow! This man who is made of dust, who was born in sin, is now by his faith, amazing!” Jesus marveled at the faith of the Roman centurion, an officer in the army who had authority over a 100 soldiers and in some cases an advanced centurion could command a cohort [of 800] or even a legion [10 cohorts]. We don’t know how powerful this centurion truly was. But they were men of power. The centurion described what he was used to -- he described his power -- at verse 8: “I say to one [of my soldiers], ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another [soldier] ‘Come,’ and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” That was the kind of power and authority the centurion knew.

But we can’t lose sight of the spectacular contrast within this centurion going on in his soul. Some might conjecture that this was a proud man, full of himself, full of his power. What do we say about power? You know the saying, “Power corrupts.” This, however, was not the case with this centurion. He knew power and authority alright, but it had not gone to his head and in this case we have evidence that the Holy Spirit had already visited this centurion. He had allowed him to hear about Jesus and faith was given him. This centurion had faith, so yes, he knew all about power, but surrounding this knowledge of power was faith.

This is not an incidental record in Luke’s gospel. Luke had an agenda: he records the truth about Jesus and the truth of Jesus, but he does so in such a way that there will be absolutely no doubt that Jesus did not just come for a chosen few, but that Jesus came for all. This was God’s agenda. Jesus came for the Jews, yes, but Jesus also came for outsiders and outcasts and in the case of the centurion, an officer in a pagan army. A human symbol of the Roman symbols in the face of Yahweh; a man whose very vocation represented the Romans who just renamed all of the Greek gods so as to make them their own.

Jesus’ own testimony that he marveled over the faith of one such as this was surely a powerful step towards the breakthrough that was the Gentile mission of the Christian Church. Faith in Jesus is the key to salvation, not ethnic affiliation. This reality is one of the reasons I love living here with you in Southern California. Some don’t speak very fondly of us. We live in a state in which businesses have left us left and right, we have a very high cost of living, there’s traffic, crowds, earthquakes, but the world has been gathered here. We live in a place where

the diversity of “Gentiles” like myself and like you is astounding and we are Christians given this mission still today to reach all people from all nations. This is an exciting place to be and I for one would have it no other way.

But we learn from Jesus that no one is to be excluded from our mission to share the Gospel, and we learn from Jesus that He excludes no one from the love of God. But we also learn from this centurion, big time. This man of power and authority completely switched gears when it came to Jesus: he did not exert any imagined status or right, but instead he humbled himself and in so doing confessed that there is only One with all power and authority: Jesus. Ephrem the Syrian put it this way as if speaking as the centurion: “I am not capable of receiving the Sun of Righteousness in its entirety; a little radiance from it is sufficient for me to remove sickness, as it does for the darkness.” (Ancient Christian Commentary, Luke, 116)

The centurion was in effect saying, “I am so low and so powerless, I could not even come to You in person, so I sent a contingent of Jewish elders and then when You got close to my home, I sent friends; because I am not worthy of You to come under my roof. And what is more I am so low that I could not even speak to You with my own lips, but none of this matters; I do not matter. All that matters is that You are here; I am nothing, but You are everything, You are Savior, You are Lord, and yes, I know how power and authority works: just say the word and whatever You command, whatever You say, will happen. This I know, because You have all power and authority; nothing is too hard for You.”

This Scripture is not a recipe for our becoming enthusiasts who if we can only get our humility meter just right then God will give us whatever we want. We do not treat prayer like magic or as an app: you get whatever you conjure or download! Put in the right payment (be it the right humility, the right intensity of faith, or whatever) and God will come through just like He did here in Luke 7. Not at all.

Much to the contrary this centurion knew that all that mattered was the word and command of the one with all authority. If He says “yes,” then it is yes; if He says “no,” then it is no, but what really matters is that the centurion knew that Jesus’ WORD was good and that somehow it would bring a blessing. Let this be clear: the centurion in all humility and faith was utterly convinced that by the power of Jesus’ word, his servant would experience healing. Period.

He knew the reality: Jesus has all power, but also compassion; that Jesus has all authority, but also love; and what was key was His WORD and that through His WORD, there would be healing. This the centurion knew. It wasn’t about himself. Jesus didn’t have to see him, hear his voice, or come into his house...there was nothing about the centurion that changed the reality that Jesus is all power and all love whose WORD blesses and heals. No doubt, absolutely none! And this is what made Jesus marvel.

This principle of the WORD that brings healing and blessing has not changed. The WORD of Jesus is powerful. It heals all of the time. I shared Christ's WORD with a parishioner once who was terrified about her surgery, but when she heard Psalm 17 about hiding in the shadow of the Lord's wings, all of a sudden she was utterly calm. The doctors who worked over her later were amazed at how their concern about her losing too much blood was completely eradicated during the surgery. The surgery was a success in Jesus' name and the doctors testified to receiving help that they could not explain. In another instance Jesus' WORD was given to a very sick parishioner. He was not physically healed, but received an unexpected peace and a radiance of faith that he had never experienced in his entire life. He died, but the power of Jesus' Word did not fail him. He died with the powerful Word of Christ leading him to glory. He too received healing.

As you all know we have been praying regularly for Pastor Geisler and there is something which Pastor Geisler has always taught me: you know how when something that is perceived as good happens, then people will say, "God is good!" And indeed we are to say this, in fact the Word itself says, "God is very great!" (Ps 104) But Pastor Geisler has been careful to teach that just because we perceive circumstances to be good or great, that this does not suddenly make God good or great. God is always good; God is always great regardless of how we perceive the circumstances. This is one way of understanding the centurion's true faith: Jesus had arrived! He was now in a win-win situation! Jesus who is all power and compassion WILL speak and when He does, good things, no, great things happen. That's a fact.

There is someone else who gets this and I speak of God's good creation now, I do not speak of anything he has accomplished within himself...I simply profess what is true about what God has done in him...but that someone is Pastor Mueller. He has been a stalwart example of "Christ-alone," and when it comes to the most challenging questions on doctrine and practice, it is always about, "What does Jesus' WORD say?" For 25 years the Lord's servant Steven P. Mueller has been his faithful servant. He has been weak and lowly like the centurion, but he has also been full of faith to welcome the Lord into his life by grace and with a living faith given to him he has seen the Lord bless him through his faithful wife Nina, and as he has raised -- with her -- three great sons, and as he has served in holy ministry as pastor and teacher, professor, author, administrator and leader. The Lord has blessed my friend and colleague with many talents and we have already seen a tremendous return that these talents have yielded. Today, we celebrate 25 years, but in such a way so as to give thanks to God and to rely upon the WORD of Christ to bless Pastor Mueller to do even more in the Kingdom of God in the years to come. This is something we are supposed to do in the Church and we will employ a rite from our Lutheran Service Book agenda immediately following this sermon as we give thanks to God for Pastor Mueller.

On a personal note: I celebrate him as well. He has always been a mentor-brother to me. We are colleagues and side-by-side in ministry, but he is my big brother in Christ. He soothes me and encourages me; his example always teaches me; and over the years he has

been with me when I was overwhelmed with struggles or discouragement. He was there for me in college when I had second thoughts about going to seminary; he was there for me in seminary when Traci and I couldn't even afford a Christmas tree and he delivered one to us; he has been there for me in my pastorate over the years when I faced great challenges in the ministry and in my personal life...he has also been a true servant of God to me. Many know him through his scholarship that has led to outstanding works which equip the Church; through his leadership that has assembled one of the best theological faculties in the world; and/or through his teaching that has transformed lives, but I also know him as the one who introduced me to rabbit stew, to the reminder that we cannot take ourselves too seriously (a lesson I'm still working on), and his example that does not go unnoticed: don't get too elated over what we perceive as great; and don't get too downcast by what we perceive as bad. Why should we? We have the Lord who speaks His WORD to us and His Word always blesses.

This Word dear Christian has blessed you, through it you are absolved of all your sins; through it, not even death can stop your life. You too – like the centurion's servant – have been healed. So let's keep saying with the centurion, "But say the Word Lord, just say the Word."