

## Sermon by Bryan Fredrickson: “The ‘Kneeling’ Centurion”

### *Luke 7:1-10*

*After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.*

The gospel story this morning is a healing story. There are a number of healing stories in the gospel of Luke. Luke was reputedly a physician, so it's not surprising to find healing stories in his gospel.

Today's healing story comes on the heels of a number of healings that Jesus performed in the previous chapter of Luke. It's interesting that often we are left to wonder if the healings Jesus performed left any lasting change in the people he healed. I mean change at the soul level. Once in awhile, as in the story of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, we are told that the healing resulted in a changed human being. But usually we are left to wonder.

In our gospel this morning, Jesus cured a person of some grave illness. And he did it from a distance, which is different from his typical healings where he was able to touch the afflicted person. From that aspect alone, it is a wondrous story. However, was the slave really changed at the soul level by being cured? Again, we are left to wonder.

Yet, there is a deeper, archetypal story underlying the healing of the slave that captures my imagination. It's a part of the story one would typically not really think much about. It involves a different character in the story, one who actually did experience a healing at the soul level. That person was the centurion. To understand what I mean we have to look at the subtle distinction I am making between a person who is merely cured of some ailment, and one who is actually healed.

The Jesuit priest and mystic, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, made the distinction this way. He said to be “cured” is to be restored to a previous state of good health. To be cured is to go back to the way one was before the illness. No real change occurs at the spiritual level. To be cured is to look backward.

To be healed is not necessarily to be cured. To be healed is to accept one's circumstances, even though they may be adverse, and move forward in evolutionary time a more enriched person for the experience. It's to see God's presence in the experience. It is surrendering to what is in the moment. To be healed is transformative. It looks forward.

So, hold onto that distinction for the moment.

As the gospel story features a centurion, we also need to explore who the centurions were. A centurion commanded about 100 soldiers; hence the name. A legion contained between 5,000 and 5500 men. The Roman army was comprised of about 28 legions. So, if you do the math, there were approximately 1500 centurions, give or take, in the entire Roman army. Not many. They were the leadership backbone of the Roman army, probably the finest tactical fighting unit in all of history; or at least of ancient history.

These men were important to Caesar. He took care of them. He gave them plenty of money. He gave them weapons inlaid with silver and gold. They got to share in the spoils of their conquests. They were given slaves to command. And they were provided with courtesans. Caesar is reported to have said, "My men fight just as well stinking of perfume."

The centurion in our gospel story brags about his position saying, "I am a man with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." That's control. That's power. The centurion had power, he had prestige and he had possessions.

Now let's revisit the story. Luke indicates the centurion had heard about Jesus and his healing powers. He sent for him to come and cure an important slave of his who was ill. So Jesus begins the journey to his house. Then something extraordinary happens. When Jesus gets close to the centurion's house, the centurion sends his friends to him to tell him to stop because "I am not worthy to have you come under my roof." We are told twice in the story the centurion did not feel "worthy." He wants Jesus to heal the slave from a distance. He didn't have the courage to face him, or even sneak around to see him at night the way Nicodemus did. Can you picture this? A centurion, in all the glory of his station in life, won't face this poor, itinerant preacher/healer with nowhere to lay his head at night. The man at the top finds himself at the bottom, recognizing his unworthiness, admitting his powerlessness, in the face of these circumstances. You've got to see this extraordinary repositioning of power. Many believe it is the admission of unworthiness or powerlessness that is the first step in the spiritual healing process. You've probably heard it in the context of 12-step programs.

Fr. Thomas Keating has spent a lifetime developing a process for interior transformation. Fr. Thomas says every person has three energy centers, or programs for happiness, which motivate most of his or her behavior. The first is a desire for power and control. The second is desire for affection and esteem. The third is desire for security and safety. These false programs for happiness prop up our egos.

Power, prestige and possessions feed the energy centers. Whenever we feed them, they get stronger. If one is a power/control person, one seeks to exert power and control over others. If

one is an affection/esteem person, one needs narcissistic affection and approval from others. If one is a person who craves safety and security, one generally surrounds himself or herself with money and possessions to guarantee one's security. All of us become attached to these false programs for happiness to one degree or another. Generally one energy center will pre-dominate our character. But we're susceptible to all three, as was the centurion. None of these programs for happiness leads us to true happiness or spiritual fulfillment or contentment or peace. These things lead to addictive behaviors that define our existence and negatively affect those around us.

Jesus had a few things to say about this topic in his sermon on the mount. "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Not those attached to their possessions). "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth." (Not those addicted to power). "Blessed are those who have been persecuted, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Not those who crave adulation).

Gerald May said in his book, 'Addiction and Grace,' "Consecration is the bridge between reformation and transformation." What the centurion experienced was a consecrated moment of spiritual insight and recognition where he was able to see reality through eyes larger than his own. He had a moment in which it became crystal clear that his small centurion self paled in comparison to the energy, light, and love of Jesus. We don't know how that happened. As with many Bible stories, we are asked to fill in the details. But something extraordinary happened there. It happens in our lives too, these flashes of insight that remind us just how small we are in the great mystery, yet how loved we are by God and how beautiful it is to be a part of the mystery.

God makes the God-self known through our frailties; through life's imperfections, not through perfection, performance, or power. As St. Paul said, "When I am weak then I am strong." And so it appears the centurion embraced his littleness, and we can picture him brought to his knees in his house grappling with this epiphany.

The gospel story would be great if it stopped there. But, the story gets even more extraordinary. Jesus lauds the centurion for his faith and holds him up as an example to the Jews. Jesus had a way of always turning everything upside down. The man who represented the political class oppressing the Jews, was being held up as an example of faith to Jesus' own people.

Jesus welcomes anybody into the kingdom, especially the sinner; the person trapped in his or her small, ego self, including you and me, who often miss the big picture. His kingdom is inclusive. Anyone who accepts God's gift of grace is already there. God's grace, in one consecrated moment after another after another, heals us from our desire for power, prestige and possessions and welcomes us into His kingdom. It is counter intuitive. We have to give up and let go of who we think we are in order to receive the gift.

I've heard faith described as the humble acceptance of paradox. For me, that's as good a definition as any. The centurion on his knees beautifully illustrates this definition of faith.

