

Luke 7:1-10
Second Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon Series: Stretch Marks
When I Contemplate God's Almighty Power

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church
Winchester, VA
Pastor Paul Krueger
June 23, 2019

When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum. ² There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. ³ The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. ⁴ When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, ⁵ because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." ⁶ So Jesus went with them.

He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. ⁷ That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁸ For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

⁹ When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." ¹⁰ Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

Grace and peace to you from our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Despite everything he had going for him, it still wasn't enough. Stop on the streets of Capernaum and pull someone aside, ask them what they thought of the local centurion. "That man is amazing," the answer may have been, "I wish I could command the kind of respect and loyalty he has with his men. He tells them to do something and they act without hesitation. Plus, he's connected. He's got friends in all the right places. And it wouldn't be terrible to live the life of luxury he enjoys as a centurion, servants at home to pamper you in your every need. The guy's loaded, did you know he privately financed the synagogue? That's maybe the coolest thing about him. I don't know very many proselytes, much less from Rome. It kind of boggles your mind doesn't it? A commander from the enemy army who confesses Yahweh as God. Yeah, he's a pretty amazing guy."

Authority, influence, wealth, comfort, honor, and respect. He really had it all. But it still wasn't enough. There were some things he still had no power or influence over whatsoever, an ugly truth that was driven home that spring when something dreadful happened. St. Luke puts it into simple words, **a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die.** Suddenly, this man came face to face with the truth that no matter how much he had going for him, some things were simply out of his control. Sometimes even if you have everything, it isn't enough.

I think we can feel sympathetic toward him. He was a Gentile like you and me. And like us, too, he had heard the message of the Scriptures. Somewhere along the line someone told him about God's promise to send a Savior for everyone in this world, Jew or Gentile, man or woman,

rich or poor and he believed it. So moved was he by God's merciful love for him, that he felt compelled to show his love to the people around him. So he wrote a check and said, "Come on, let's build a church!" Not a bad guy to have around. He's the kind of guy who it seems would be pretty easy to like. He's the kind of guy it seems like God would love as well. And that's what makes it kind of surprising, isn't it? That God would take a believer who was doing his best to love the people around him—using the resources God had entrusted to him to see God's name proclaimed—and rip his life in two with something like this?

It certainly surprised the religious leaders of his day. When they came to Jesus on his behalf, their message was clear: **This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.** Bad things shouldn't happen to good people, Jesus, and this guy's about as good as they come. God owes him more than this; this just doesn't make sense... Are you familiar with that train of thought? Have you perhaps felt it yourself at times? *If God is all powerful and all loving and He knows that I love Him, then how he let something like this happen to me or this person I love?*

We know and confess that we're saved by grace, His undeserved love. We've already said it this morning as we confessed that while we've done what is evil and failed to do what is good, God has been merciful to us and has given His only Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. But it still surprises us too, doesn't it? That deep, horrible surprise that comes when God lets Christians suffer. Sometimes badly. When the person who faithfully builds up the church watches tragedy strike their own family. When the couple with the living faith sees their own child get sick or die. There's a part of us that cries, "We deserve more from God than this!"

But here's the real surprising part. This man, an outsider, a newcomer to Jesus, he doesn't ask why, and he doesn't try to impress Jesus with how wonderful he is. Listen to how he handled things: **He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to Him: "Lord, don't trouble Yourself, for I do not deserve to have You come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to You. But say the word, and my servant will be healed."**

You see, this man who had everything, who had learned that that wasn't enough, had also heard about Jesus. He knew that no matter how impressive he was before men, if he tried to boast about his own goodness or his own worthiness before God, he'd be wasting his breath. He knew God wasn't impressed by power or money, that the good things he had done didn't erase the bad. But that didn't stop him. Because he had heard about Jesus' power and he had heard about Jesus' love, and that gave him the confidence to only want one thing from him. A promise. His one request from Jesus: **Say the word.** As a man who sent soldiers scattering at his word, as a man whose command could tear down a town or rebuild it, he knew that power and authority carried the day, and Jesus had demonstrated that His power and authority were supreme. There was only one thing that he needed to know, was Jesus willing to use His power to help him? If so, just a word would be enough.

Two thousand years ago, God had St. Luke record this account for you and me, because the centurion isn't the only one who finds himself facing troubles that are beyond his control. You don't have a servant at home who's sick and dying. But you do have troubles that you're facing right now. Or you have. Or you will. And when that struggle hits you, then no matter what you have going for you in life the realization that sets in is that it is not enough.

God has given you the promise that you can always find Him in His Word, that when you go to God's promises, there you'll find what we truly need. What a gift! And what a reason for shame when we don't go there. When instead of running to God's word in time of trouble, we run away from it. The centurion knew that, and prayed, "Just say the word." When it's hard for you to do that, when you see Christian churches denying more and more of God's Word and seeming to grow all the more for it, when it seems like you're facing so much pain in your body or your heart that no simple word could fix it, remember who Jesus is, and the kind of words He speaks.

You see, there was someone else who had everything, but it wasn't enough. He had an existence free from pain or sadness, the floor under His feet was a heavenly sapphire and the ceiling above Him an eternal rainbow. He had angels who sang His praise. He had so much power that He could just say the word, and light broke forth from the darkness and the galaxies swirled together out of the nothingness. But it wasn't enough. There was something else He wanted, but it was taken away from Him. More to the point, it ran away from Him. So the One who spoke at the beginning of creation spoke again. He spoke to a frightened man and woman in a garden dressed only in fig leaves and shame, and His words were like the hug of a Father welcoming His children home. To a prophet named Isaiah He spoke the word **Immanuel**—God with us—so that His people would know that they weren't alone. Seven hundred years later, when He walked on earth, time and again He just spoke a word and amazing things happened: the blind man saw, the sick woman was healed, the thousands were fed, and the storms stopped raging. And when they nailed Him to the cross, Jesus just said the words, **Father forgive them**, to show that human sins can't erase God's love, and as He died He spoke the word, **It's finished**, to show that God's love does erase our sins. And when He rose from the dead, He came face to face with the disciples who had run from His words and failed to trust Him the way we so often do, and He just spoke the words, **Peace be with you** to let us know how complete His forgiveness is. And who does He speak His word to now? To you! In the waters of your Baptism He says, "You are forever mine, and I am yours." At His Table today He says, **Take and eat, this is My body and blood that washes away your sins**. And even in hardness and sickness and heart break—especially in those times—He speaks, so that even if your own heart should tell you that God must certainly have stopped loving you or forgotten you, Jesus' voice calls out to you, **Don't be afraid, I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will hold you in my hand** (Is 41:10). **All authority in heaven and earth has been given to Me**, (Mt 28:18) and I've given Myself to you so that even at death's door you can say, "I have Jesus. I have enough."

Jesus said the word, and the centurion found his servant healthy and whole. But don't go home today thinking that's the greatest miracle in you heard about this morning. When Jesus heard the message the centurion had sent to Him, **He was amazed, and turning to the crowd following Him, He said, I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel**. To Jesus, there is no greater miracle than when we hear His word and believe it. There He gives us life and strength and peace, there He calls us His children. Cling to that word. When you hold to Jesus' word, when you confess it, when you find in it your hope and your Savior, God looks at us and a smile of holy awe crosses His face. He sees a miracle.

There was once a person who had everything, but it wasn't enough. You know, of course, who that is. It's you. It's you on the days when all of God's blessings to you can't erase from your minds all your fears, and all of your deeds can't wipe away your feelings of guilt. It's you when the person you love is sick or dying or dead; it's you when you are on the hospital bed. When you go to God in your deepest prayers hoping for the greatest answer, what will you ask Him for? I don't think you'll ever find a better answer than the one that actually amazed Jesus, the one spoken by this first man who had everything but not enough. Just say the Word. "Jesus, give me Your promises. Tell me again how much You love me, tell me again that You've washed away my sins. Tell me that You have authority over everything and You'll always be with me." And He will. And He does. And then, rich or poor, sick or healthy, surrounded by family or all alone, it will be you who is able to say the words, "Thank you, Jesus, for being my Savior. Thank you, Jesus, for giving me Yourself. Thank you, Jesus, because now I have enough."

Amen.