

Amazing Faith for a New Age
Luke 7; 1-10
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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We enjoy singing the old hymn, Amazing Grace because it reminds us our salvation is a love gift from God. If we choose to receive it, we become candidates for amazing faith, but unlike grace, faith doesn't always come easily.

We'd admit our faith is inadequate, especially when we decide to turn on the auto pilot and stray into the weeds. Hopefully a healthy dose of guilt prods us to ask God to bring us back to where we belong. We learn the hard way living by faith is a one step forward, two steps backwards affair.

Sometimes you enter a commercial parking garage, and see those spikes coming up from the pavement in the exit lane. They're put there to make sure you don't sneak in without paying. When you'd finally exit, as you drive over the spikes, they collapse and let you pass over. However, if you decide to back up, as the warning sign says, you'll get "severe tire damage." Likewise, going backwards in your faith journey causes severe spiritual damage that will take time and effort to repair.

Although maintaining a forward moving faith is a challenge, every once a while God gives us opportunities to experience amazing faith. It doesn't happen in a vacuum. It usually happens when your back's against the wall and you suddenly sense the overwhelming need to trust God.

A case in point is Luke's story of the Roman centurion whose servant was terminally ill. Feeling unworthy to ask Jesus for help in person, he sent a delegation of Jews from the local synagogue as his advocates.

The fact that Jewish elders consented to speak on behalf of a Roman soldier is surprising to say the least, especially when Luke's gospel has a subplot detailing the animosity the Jews had for Gentiles in general and Romans in particular.

According to the prevailing interpretation of the Law of Moses, championed by the Pharisees, Jews could never have any unnecessary dealings with Gentiles because their pagan ways threatened to undermine Jewish culture and faith.

Unlike many of his comrades, this centurion respected the Jewish faith. The Jews called men like him, "God Fearers." God Fearers came to realize the prevailing Greco/Roman religions failed to satisfy their deepest longings. They didn't convert to the Jewish faith but they

were still awed by the Jews' devotion to the one true God. Jesus would say the God fearers were not far from the Kingdom of God.

Luke's story of the centurion is pertinent to his greater narrative. Remember, Luke also wrote the Book of Acts, showing how the God of Abraham wasn't just for Jews anymore. It was time for the rift between Jewish Christians and Gentiles to heal. This healing process got momentum when Peter was instructed to enter the house of Cornelius, another Roman centurion, to preach Christ's Gospel to the Gentiles for the first time. (Acts 10: 1-48)

In effect, this story of Jesus and the Centurion foreshadowed Peter's, and later Paul's, mission to, "Go and make disciples" of the Gentiles.

So besides being a story of a Gentile's amazing faith, Luke's also proclaimed something else amazing, the dawning of the new age. God's prophecy to Abraham about his descendants becoming a blessing to all the nations was finally beginning to happen! By the power of the Holy Spirit, ancient animosities between ethnic groups started crumbling. At least, that's what was supposed to happen. Two thousand years later, God's still waiting for most of us to get with the program.

Anyway, let's explore the wider implications in this passage that makes it more than just another healing story.

According to Luke, Jesus just finished a preaching and healing campaign in Galilee and retired to Capernaum for rest and relaxation. Instead when people learned Jesus was in town they started coming to him, starting with the centurion who had a slave who was terminally ill.

This centurion didn't himself come to Jesus. Instead, he sent the Jewish elders to appeal to Jesus on his behalf.

Reading between the lines, Jesus had to be impressed. Normally, religious leaders confronted Jesus to argue with him about breaking Sabbath laws and traditions. This time they came asking for help, not for themselves but for a Gentile! If Jesus wasn't knocked for a loop, Luke doesn't say. We only know Jesus agreed to go to the centurion's house.

On the way, Jesus was met by a second delegation. Speaking for the centurion, they said, "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."

In other words, "Jesus, I'm not good enough to have you in my house. You only have to give the command where from you are right now and I know my servant will be healed."

The centurion stayed in the house not because he was proud but because he thought himself unworthy. Also notice this centurion instructed his friends to address Jesus as "Lord." Apparently he recognized Jesus had authority from above.

He went on to say through his friends, “For I also am a man set under the authority with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, into another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this’ and the slave does it.”

Being a soldier, the centurion lived by the chain of command. When he received orders he followed them because he was expected to obey. When he gave orders his soldiers followed them because they were expected to obey. There was no need for the centurion’s superior to leave his posts and come out to check up on him. Likewise, it wasn’t necessary for him to leave his post to check up on his soldiers. It just happened.

Luke reports, “When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him and turned into the crowd that followed him and said, “I tell tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” (Luke 7:9)

Jesus was using hyperbole when he claimed he never met a Jew who could equal this Roman centurion’s amazing faith to make a point. He wanted the Jews in the crowd to hear they didn’t have a corner on the market when it came to faith. Luke doesn’t report how the Jews reacted but I imagine they were surprised and shocked by what Jesus said.

We need to be shocked too. Jesus was holding up as an example of faithfulness the most unlikely candidate, someone brought up in a pagan culture with no exposure to Jewish faith and practice. What’s more, even though he was a hardened warrior, he was just as capable as any priest, Pharisee, or even Jesus’ own disciples of demonstrating an amazing faith.

We need to rethink our preconceived notions of other peoples’ capacity for faith and not write them off as lost and unworthy of our attention. Just because many folks aren’t involved in organized religion doesn’t mean they’re incapable of faith. God’s reach extends much further than we imagine.

Jesus respected and loved that centurion even though he never saw him. He probably wanted to go to his house but he didn’t. Instead, he respected the centurion’s request and stayed away.

Luke was a Gentile and he wrote his gospel for Gentiles because he wanted them to know Christ. He also wanted Jewish Christians to know that they were responsible for bringing Christ to the Gentiles. A tremendous shift was taking place and Luke wanted everybody to get on board.

Do you remember me talking about the five- hundred -year cycles over the last 2,500 years? Every five hundred years from the time of the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC up until the present day, every 500 years there’ve been seismic shifts in the world that impacted the way God’s people lived out their faith. The generation of Jesus, Peter and Paul was at the beginning of the second great shift, Christianity emerging from Judaism. Abraham’s descendants now included Gentiles. As I said earlier, the God of Abraham wasn’t just for Jews anymore.

Some observers believe our generation is at the cusp of the next great shift in faith and practice because we're experiencing great changes in the world. It's an uncertain and messy time and we're finding ourselves in the middle of it.

But not to worry, somehow God's in the mix. Look at it this way, besides being an uncertain time, it's also an opportune time. The Holy Spirit is coming to lead us into a new age of understanding how to be the Church in the twenty first century. As Christians we need to recognize these shifts but also the generosity of the Spirit, blessing us with the same capacity of radical obedience demonstrated by that first generation of Christians.

This is not a time to go backwards, otherwise we'd suffer severe spiritual damage that will take needed time and energy to repair. Instead, we can put that same amount of time and energy to move forward into the new beginning Gods is preparing us for so we can bring the gospel to all the latter day Gentiles we are called to love and serve in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.