

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.

+++++

How Healing Starts

Often, the New Testament story we heard today from Luke, about the Centurion roman Soldier, whose slave Jesus heals from afar, is said to have two lessons: Jesus has divine authority, and it's important to have faith. Authority and faith.

The problem for churches, though, is that talk of "authority" and "faith" often gets distorted. Too often teachings about *God's* authority some morphs into the authority of church leaders – church hierarchies or ministers – to tell churchgoers what God thinks; too frequently the importance of faith shifts to become an insistence that those in the pews have faith by believing X, Y or Z -- a particular creed or list of tenets about Jesus.

So for today, I want to turn to a third piece of this story less often discussed – the question of the background setting. Why did healing take place this time, at this place? What were the circumstances, how was the ground laid, so it was fertile to healing? Can we get inside the Centurion's head, to wonder what he was thinking, as he approached Jesus, to entice him to come heal his slave, and why Jesus was even responding to this Roman soldier's invitation? I think it's an important lesson in how we reach out to and honor ones we don't know. How we move beyond social borders and first impressions. How doing this – reaching out, moving beyond social dividing lines - sets up the situation where powerful healing can take place.

Think about the Roman Centurion's dilemma. He is in Capernaum, a fishing village of about 1500 people on the Sea of Galilee. And his servant is very sick, near death. The situation is desperate.

Suddenly someone rushes up to the Centurion's Home – Jesus has just entered Capernaum – Jesus, the healer!

Everyone in town has heard about Jesus. Capernaum is the home town of Peter and Andrew, two brothers who had abandoned their fishing business to follow Jesus. There on the Sea of Galilee in Israel, where fishing was the main business, everyone has been talking about this.

Jesus was controversial. The first stories were about Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law: she'd had a raging fever until Jesus visited her house, and then instantly she was up and about as usual, cooking and bustling around her house again. Folks from Capernaum had flooded her house that night clamoring for Jesus' help with their own problems, and he cared for them all, late into the night. But by the next morning he'd left, saying he was going on to other villages.

Another time when Jesus had come to town he had gone to the synagogue on the Sabbath, and taught. When a man with a demon had started shouting, Jesus had acted as if he had authority over the demon, saying "Come out!" Who said that kind of thing? But the man clearly was better. Synagogue members were still debating it: Jesus, a crazy man himself, some egomaniac, or a real healer?

We don't know what the Centurion thought of Jesus – but his slave would die very soon, so it must have seemed worth the shot to call the supposed healer. But with 1500 people in town, a history of crowds seeking his help, and the servant dying right now, Jesus had to come right away, to a Roman soldier's home, of all places, a Gentile home that Jews believed would defile them.

This Centurion, you see, was apparently not a typical head of a local Roman army garrison of occupying soldiers. This Centurion had learned about the customs of the Jews of Capernaum, knew how they gathered at the synagogue, had even paid for their new synagogue when the first had needed extensive repair. We don't know why the Centurion had done this – perhaps he'd employed a brand of community policing, and through that link between community and law enforcement, gotten to know the leaders well enough to transform the relationship from hierarchical to collegial, as occurs when community policy thrives; maybe the Centurion was intrigued by the different religions where he was stationed, and always sought to learn; perhaps he was a Roman who genuinely got beyond social labels like "slave" or "Jew;" once he knew people as individuals, those trappings dropped.

For any of these reasons, this Centurion is also aware of and respects the Jewish customs and traditions. He seeks to honor Jesus by reaching him through the channels of respect in the Jewish culture, through the Jewish elders of the synagogue. Will they exercise their influence and get Jesus to rush to his home? A life is at stake!

Because of their relationships of mutual respect, despite what may have been their own reservations about Jesus' controversial ways, the Jewish elders did as asked, for their friend the Centurion, and rush to Jesus and beg him, Please, please, will you come to this Roman's home? They say: "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 starts making his way toward the Centurion's home.

+++++

Honoring religious traditions is important. Here at King's Chapel, we are particularly aware of this. Each day in the summer, over 1000 people can come through these doors to see our building and learn about our history. To know the continuity of our traditions, to appreciate how in this place we can tell the story of how our nation was founded, how Christianity developed in the new world, how the Church of England spawned a series of dissenters and followers – Puritans opposing them, Anglicans and later Episcopalians following them, and this church, carving its own path, with early Unitarian thought. Our history grounds us – not just us in this church, but the wider church. In a constantly changing world of fads that come and go, our religious traditions can be the center that holds. In this service of Morning Prayer, we use ancient liturgical words from the Anglican prayer book, words that have become a part of us. We will re-enact our sacrament of holy communion, reciting words that we understand Jesus said 2000 years ago; we read ancient psalms even older. We understand the value of religious tradition, just as the Jews of Jesus' time did. To appeal to us through our religious traditions is effective, as it was effective for the Centurion to appeal to Jesus through the traditional use of the Synagogue elders.

+++++

But that was not the end of the story. The Centurion, meanwhile, apparently had kept thinking, recognizing that appeal to old traditions might not get the needed job done, because Jesus would still face the barrier, as a Jew, of entering into his home, that of an unclean Roman. In order to fully welcome and honor Jesus, the healer, some old traditions, some old ways of thinking would need to be broken or transformed. And this Jesus - who himself was different – might consider new ideas, Cornelius must have reasoned.

So after dispatching the Elders of the Synagogue to Jesus, we hear that a second messenger arrives. The Centurion had thought outside the box, and applied a Roman traditions to this Jewish situation: if a Centurion and his superior could command people from afar, this Jesus could, too. The Centurion's senior officer did not need to deliver orders personally to the Centurion; if a messenger sent the proper orders, it would be done.

The Centurion, as a military tactician, as someone who had had to adapt to new cultures and situations, as someone who had practiced acting outside the box before – had actually befriended a slave and Jews - this man apparently had the ability to apply old traditions in new ways. And the healing took place.

The critical turn in this story, that allowed the healing of a servant in grave need, was not the precise following of old religious prescriptions. It was not an appeal to the *worthiness* of the Centurion. In the second appeal the Centurion discounts his worthiness. Rather, an openness to new way of using old traditions, from within the Jewish tradition and beyond it, was what made circumstances ripe for healing.

+++++

What about us? How might any of us be healed in a fresh way?

+++++

Let me tell you about Ginnie.

Ginnie is a highly successful businesswoman, who attended private boarding school, Harvard College, business school, and as an American had learned to speak fluent Mandarin years ago, before that became more common with the current generation.

I spoke to her a bit over the years, as she thrived in her work, got married, and started having children, but it wasn't really until our 25th college reunion that she and I had another long talk. It was about her second child, and she was worried. He was having many challenges.

At our 35th reunion I learned more, much more. George is now 13 and severely autistic. He understands language but cannot yet speak. He has made progress through his special school, but his behavior can continue to be erratic –or it seems erratic to us, because he can't tell his Mom why he's acting the way he is, though she also understands a lot more.

Ginnie and her family attended her local church in Houston, the same Episcopal denomination in which she was raised, and her son was able to be cared for in the nursery there until he was 5 years old. After that, he was expected to be able to come into the worship service at least part of each service, but he could not.

The family slowly drifted away from church until Ginnie realized, I need this. I need to worship together as a family. It's too hard for me to work and care for our son without the support I find in church. I need that community. I need that hour for restoration each week.

So the family joined a new church, a large one known for its Special Education programs. It was hard, because Ginnie could no longer worship in the tradition in which she'd been raised, with a liturgy she loved, but this was what their son needed. Ginnie, as always, sat towards the side and back in the back of the sanctuary during services, near an aisle, in case the caregivers needed anything.

One day she was startled by a tap on her shoulder interrupting her worship; she needed to come because, she discovered, her son had bitten a caregiver. Ginnie calmed her son down, they went home, and the next day the phone call came. She, her husband and her older son were welcome at church, the minister explained, but George was no longer welcome. The church no longer welcomed George. They should pay a babysitter and keep him at home.

In desperation, Ginnie reached out to her old church. Help, she said, I need a community where we all can worship. I'll pay you to hire someone for George. But I want us all to be able to come, as a family.

There was a new head of the Sunday School at Ginnie's original church, Christ Cathedral of Houston, a large Episcopalian Church, a special education teacher, and the church was open to considering it. The program, called The Lighthouse, was born. At first George was the only child. Two volunteers were always present, in case any emergency arose, and over time. One older woman, who own grandchild is autistic, living far from her, became a monthly volunteer; she says George has changed her life, because she now understands the situation her own daughter and grandchild are living with. She has learned the techniques to soothe George, including sandwiching him between two large pillows, which he loves. George and his woman both look forward to their Sundays together.

But one Sunday morning, George broke loose and ran away from his classroom, The Lighthouse. He ran into the sanctuary in the middle of the sermon, up and down the center aisle. Ginnie got up to restrain him, struggling with him in the center aisle, and he broke away again, wildly, running onto the altar. Eventually the minister had to pause, unable to ignore the melee. A man stepped in to help and whisked George behind a door off the front of the church. Together the man and Ginnie were able to calm George down and return him to his classroom. Communion had started, Ginnie received, and went back to kneel in her pew. She could not stop sobbing, and stayed that way for the rest of the service.

Ginnie was so afraid that they'd be asked to leave again. But this time the call came, the minister said, Don't worry, George is a part of our family.

Then Ginnie could tell her story, because she was in a church that would still be a home to her family. Ginnie explained that just a few days before she had had breast cancer surgery, and been hospitalized. She'd had trouble restraining George quickly because her wounds were so fresh. George must have panicked, rushing into the sanctuary to find Ginnie because he was so afraid; a ten year old boy had needed to find his mother, to see reassure himself again that she was alive!

From all this of a new ministry started at Christ Church Cathedral, a monthly worship service, where any family with special needs children can attend, lying on the floor if they need to, moving around if they need to, making noises if they need

to. All the clergy officiate, communion is served, the service is complete. Again, it started with just Ginnie's family. It's called Rhythms of Grace.

Now the Lighthouse, George's special classroom, has many children. Now the Rhythms of Grace service is attended by many families from around the Houston area. Other Episcopal churches host a service on a rotating basis, so families could worship in such a service every Sunday, if they wanted. George and Ginnie have transformed so many churches in the Episcopal area, so many congregations, so many people.

And what broke the ground, making it all possible? Ginnie, knowing she needed help, desperate for it, as the Centurion was desperate, and knowing, like the Centurion, she could not command a response. But Ginnie, like the Centurion, thinking outside the box with her church. Finding a way to maintain the religious traditions that she needed to sustain and support her, in community, but being open to new ways to explore how that might be done. A church, seeing beyond social boundaries – no Roman or Jew, no slave or church elder, no soldier or rabbi, no able and disabled – all one. A community.

And George -- he's the healer, the One who has transformed lives, changing them forever.

May we see the Holy in George, in every George we meet, in every one of us, here and beyond these walls, in you. In you.

That's how healing begins. Amen.