

May 29, 2016 + Second Sunday after Pentecost

Unshakeable Faith Pastor Nancy Raabe

Luke 7:1-10

¹After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ²A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. ³When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. ⁴When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, ⁵for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." ⁶And 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; ⁷therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸For 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." ⁹When 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." ¹⁰When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

It is the Second Sunday of Pentecost and flowers are in full bloom all around us.

But seasonal blooms fade and wither, just as our own bodies do during the natural course of aging. Right now, at this moment, in this place, each of us is fully alive. But we are also dying. We can fight this reality, or we can acknowledge it. What role does faith play in this discernment?

In a way, the Christian life is about learning to die well. As we approach death, what is deep in our heart? Are we resentful and angry, refusing to let go? Or have we come to believe what God's Word has been telling us, as proclaimed by the church through its liturgy and song—that death is not the end, that Christ has conquered death, and that life, eternal life, is the victor? Do you recall Easter hymn, "I Know that My Redeemer Lives"? Sing this stanza with me, if the words come to mind:

*He lives and grants me daily breath;
He lives, and I shall conquer death.
He lives my mansion to prepare;
He lives to bring me safely there.*

So we are assured of eternal life with Jesus as we wait for the coming of that last, great day. But naturally, we would still like to be alive as long as possible—and we'd like the same for our loved ones. So in times of serious illness we dare to pray, "Lord, pour down your healing power on my sister! Give the doctors the wisdom to make her well again!" And if traditional avenues of healing have been exhausted, we might even dare to pray for a miracle: "Lord, I am unworthy to ask, but please restore my sister to life!"

In today's Gospel reading from Luke we meet a daring man just like this, a Roman centurion who begs Jesus for a miracle even while admitting he is unworthy. A centurion was a high-ranking Roman soldier with 100 or so men under his command. Apparently this centurion was also charged with overseeing the outpost town of Capernaum. If we take a closer look at this account, we discover many interesting things.

- This centurion is kindly toward all, treasures his slave, and values the people of the town so much that that he even arranged for the construction of their synagogue. He is deeply distressed by his slave's illness and seems to be willing to do anything to bring the slave back to health.
- Although is a Gentile, or non-believer, the centurion somehow recognizes Jesus' authority as far superior to his own.
- He is convinced that if he can only get Jesus to come to his house, his slave will be healed.
- But when the centurion takes the first step—to send some Jewish elders to ask Jesus to come to him—he quickly realizes he has done two things wrong.
 - First, it was a mistake to send Jewish elders, because their approach was to basically say to Jesus, "You owe it to him" – that the centurion is worthy of Jesus' time and attention because he has been their benefactor.
 - Second, the centurion realizes that in fact he is *not* worthy to receive Jesus in his house, because this would go against religious convention. So he sends his friends to Jesus, asking only that Jesus speak the words of healing, wherever he happens to be.

What the centurion is doing is professing such faith in Jesus' power to heal that he acknowledges Jesus doesn't even need to be physically present. This how we pray for our miracles, isn't it? Even though we know that Jesus is always with us, at our side, holding us, telling us how much he loves us, he is not physically present in the flesh. Yet, we trust that he hears us and will appeal to God on our behalf.

Of course, God is not a celestial handyman who immediately fixes whatever goes wrong just as we'd like. This is because Satan still rules our world. God is ruler of the universe, but here on earth, Satan is still on the loose. Paul makes this clear throughout his letters, and especially in Ephesians 6:12, where he says that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil.

Jesus performed miracles during his ministry so that people might come to know him as the Son of God. Do miracles in the Biblical sense still happen today? Only God knows. What we do know is that God's response to our prayers is often not exactly what we had in mind. We prayed for a cure, but the cancer went into remission and is now back, more widespread than before. We prayed for healing after a terrible accident; at first the doctors thought they could treat the injuries successfully, but those turned out to be too severe even for advanced medicine.

So, we might be left to wonder, what good were our prayers?

God in Christ through the Holy Spirit is always at work. Step back and look around, and you are likely to find that healing *has* taken place. The experience of going through a child's traumatic illness brought a divided family together again. During a family's extended caretaking for their mother, old sibling rivalries dissolved and they recovered the deep bounds of family that had been lost for so long. Or, alone at her

husband's bedside as he was fading away, a woman came to know Jesus Christ as never before because she felt his arms around her, and was sustained by Jesus' boundless love. Perhaps the loved one was not healed, but others were.

God calls us to have the same faith as the Roman centurion, an irrational, unshakeable faith that God hears us and will act. We need only be open to the movements of the Holy Spirit.

This is the faith that sustained countless families through the devastating losses of sons and daughters in battle. More than 600,000 soldiers died during the Civil War, more than in all our other wars combined. In 1868, Commander in Chief John A. Logan of the Grand Army of the Republic issued what was called General Order Number 11, designating May 30 as Decoration Day—now known as Memorial Day—because that's when flowers were in full bloom. He declared it to be "for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet churchyard in the land."

Tomorrow, instead of thinking "Summer is here!", picture instead the panoramic scene tomorrow in Arlington National Cemetery, where volunteers will honor each of the 420,000 grave sites with a rose. Or visit a local cemetery to decorate the graves of those who served our country. There are plenty of flowers to go around, because the flowers are in full bloom all around us.

Amen.