

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Ok, here we are. In the calendar of the greater church, we celebrated the great feast Day of Pentecost two weeks ago. And, last week? Trinity Sunday...God in three persons, blessed Trinity.

So, today? We begin the longest season of the church. A marathon, running all the way to Advent and a return to winter weather...with the great season after Pentecost.

And, in the gospel reading for today...the day we push off the starting blocks and head into the race..who is focus? Who is the prime character?

Not Jesus. For a change, it is not Jesus...but instead the most unlikely person imaginable in the first century Holy Land. A Roman centurion.

We read the story of Jesus and the centurion as a tremendous story about the nature of faith. To the question, "What is faith?", this story offers a clear answer. Look at it again. Here is a guy who so trusts the ability of Jesus to heal that he sends a servant to tell Jesus, "Just say the word." That's right, he tells Jesus not to even bother showing up, but simply to give a command. Why? Because based on his position as a centurion, he knows what authority is and he believes Jesus has it. Now that is faith!

But this fellow is as **unlikely** a character to demonstrate faith. He is, after all, a Roman centurion and we do not typically look to Roman legionnaires for examples of piety, particularly not when it comes to Jewish religious figures.

There is a second aspect to this story that affects us more directly. Because beyond being unlikely, the centurion is also...and this may be even more important....*unexpected*. This in two regards. First, Jesus himself is rather taken aback by the centurion's confidence in him; indeed, Luke describes him as being *amazed*. "Not even in Israel have I found such faith," Jesus says in response to the message sent from the centurion. God regularly shows up where we do not expect God to be, and God never, ever stops delighting in surprising us.

But I suspect it was not only Jesus who was amazed. After all, Luke's original readers hear this story thirty or forty years after the events narrated took place, and one thing that had not changed across those decades was that Rome was still in charge, still occupying Israel, still enforcing its will upon Israelites of all ranks and stations. Which means that this centurion is, well, a *centurion*, one who – as he himself admits – is used to giving orders in the Roman army and having those orders obeyed. *He is, then, one of those directly responsible for Israel's oppression.*

But I wonder if that's not part of the reason this story is shared by several of the Evangelists in the first place. I mean, just because this man is in the Roman legion doesn't mean that he is incapable of doing good? Clearly he already has. Indeed, the Jewish leaders in his town commend him to Jesus.

Further, given that he was well acquainted with these leaders, should we be surprised that he has heard of Jesus and is therefore eager to beseech him on behalf of his servant? All of which means he is more complex than perhaps many of his day, or many in our day as well, want to make him out. He is a Roman centurion *and* a man who does good for those in his community. He is part of the force occupying and oppressing Israel *and* he builds synagogues for the townspeople under his authority. It reminds me of the United States forces occupying Afghanistan....occupiers in the eyes of many there, but also a force that builds schools, hospitals, water systems, power plants, and more. I wonder if more of the Afghan people will be sorry or glad to see us finally gone. Anyway, this passage reminds us that we should never reduce someone to one attribute or judge someone based on one element of who they are.

Pope Francis reminded us of that recently as well. During a homily at mass at the Vatican, the Pope said that all people are redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ, and he invited his hearers to meet all people, whether they believe or not, at the place of doing good works. The fact that he included atheists among those who are redeemed by Christ and invited to do good works shocked many. But perhaps what we should be surprised at is not that unlikely and unexpected people demonstrate faith and do good works, but that we consider them unlikely and unexpected in the first place.

After all, Jesus commends the faith of this Roman centurion...greater than any he has known in Israel. And here is the mind-blowing element of this story....Jesus says this, and Luke reports this story, even though we have no particularly good reason to believe the centurion becomes a follower of Jesus. Do you pick up on the fact that he does not ask to follow Jesus, or confess him as the Messiah, or even seem particularly interested in meeting him? He simply sees in Jesus an authority that he recognizes and, quite frankly, needs. Maybe he becomes a disciple, maybe not. Neither Jesus nor Luke seem particularly interested. Instead, Jesus praises his astounding faith and Luke records it.

Could it be that the Gospel writer is saying to us, 'Take heed of what this foreigner does. Your faith, your trust, your reliance on God could be as his is, and it will be all the better for that.' Perhaps the unexpected faith of 'the foreigner' is one of God's gifts to the church. Those who recognize the holy places, the holy encounters, and trust themselves to that recognition may have much to teach those of us who are more calculating in our estimations. We are too easily tempted towards the thinking of the elders in the story...expecting God to acknowledge merit, and basing our faith on that 'he is worthy.' Simply relying on grace, as did the centurion, is more to the point and altogether more productive.

Maybe we should ask, 'who are the foreigners?' They will not necessarily be foreigners literally, even though they may be. But they will be those whom we have chosen to make foreign to our ways of doing things, seeing things....like the ones whose actions we have usually ignored, the ones whose voices are seldom heard, the ones whose opinions are generally overlooked, the ones who are quietly moved by the holiness of God although we have failed to notice it.

I am willing to bet that every one here knows and loves someone who is not going to church, or is not particularly strong in their faith, or is not a Christian at all. The message from the gospel today is, like the centurion, I want you to imagine that this person is also beloved of God, that this person is also being used by God to do good things, that this person may demonstrate faith that even Jesus would commend. Untold numbers of our church people love family members and friends whose relationship to the church is sketchy at best and about the only thing they hear about these folks is from the most conservative quarters of the church saying that if these folks do not believe, they will go to hell. Perhaps this Sunday we could offer a different voice, a voice that merely points to this interaction between Jesus and the centurion and invites a comparison with some of the people we know that we love but do not believe as we do.

Might we pray for these folks today...and in a different way. Instead of praying for them in asking for their conformance to our way of thinking and believing, let us offer a prayer of thanksgiving that they are in our lives. Pray that God would use them to do God's will in the world even if they would not call it that. Pray that we would have the grace and courage to commend their good works and share with them our gratitude for them and our faith that God loves and uses them.

And for us? Let us pray that we might be less surprised when God uses people we have decided are unexpected or unlikely to do wonderful things. That God would open our hearts and eyes to see that God's love, will, and work extend far beyond the confines of our church or faith. That the God who showed up in the man crucified on a cross regularly shows up where we do not expect God to be and never, ever stops delighting in surprising us....always in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.