

Communion Meditation
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
February 7, 2021

Luke 7:1-17

I remember walking into the Army recruiter's office with my 17 year old son. The first thing I noticed was the arrangement of photographs on the office wall. It was a honor pyramid, glossy 8x10's headshots of those in the command structure, from that small local recruiting branch on the bottom all the way up to the President of the United States, the Commander in Chief.

The Centurion in today's story would have been at the same military level as a captain in the US Army. This means his headshot would be a little way up the pyramid, not quite near the top but certainly not on the bottom. At his command were about 100 soldiers.

Ordinarily, he would be hated by his neighbors. His job was to direct those soldiers who used the sword to keep them all in line. But it seems like THIS Centurion made it his practice to respect the culture and religion of the people living in the small town of Capernaum. So much so, that he was even a patron of the local synagogue, with ties to that community.

That Jesus, though... now, he was the kind of character Rome wanted to keep an eye on. No permanent address, real job or steady income from which to pay taxes. His people were known for being a little excitable. These messiah types were usually found rousing the rabble against their Roman occupiers. Jesus, for his part, never advocated outright revolution against Rome that we know of. We have no gospel record of him speaking disparagingly, or treating a Roman with less respect and dignity than he would a member of his own culture.

Maybe the shattering of stereotypes is how miracles begin.

The stereotypical expectation is that if the Roman commander wanted something, he would just take it. He would march up to Jesus and pull out his sword and demand that he heal the servant. Instead, he took a more tactful and respectful route. Rather than threatening him or violating his sacred space, he asked some of the Jewish elders if they would advocate on his behalf with Jesus.

The Jewish elders, who are so often typecast as opponents to Jesus, come to him for help because of the centurion's sincere love for the people and his support of the synagogue. And without question or delay, Jesus goes. He could have gotten sidetracked into a theological discussion, saying

"Last week you people were after me about doing things on the Sabbath I shouldn't be doing, and now you want me to go to the home of a Gentile and heal his servant?" But he didn't do that, he just went.

Soon after this, Luke tells us, Jesus went to a town called Nain which was about ten miles southeast of Nazareth. It was not a particularly significant place, and this is the only time it is mentioned in the Bible. A great crowd of followers were with him. As they approached the gates of the city they met a large funeral procession going out with the casket towards the cemetery.

And so, a crowd coming to bring life is met by a crowd overwhelmed by death.

We learn that for one particular woman, this particular death was a catastrophe. Two of the hardest experiences anyone can go through, is to lose a spouse and lose a child. And even beyond all that tragedy is the grief of knowing that her life has just become infinitely more tenuous and vulnerable. Without a husband or son she has no ability to own property and has no social status. Her future may well be reduced to a life of begging or prostitution, if you could call that a life.

Learning the story and seeing the woman's grief, Jesus found his stomach churning. He was deeply moved by her plight. He stepped over and touched the body, saying, *"Young man, I say to you, arise."* And the dead man sat up and started talking. In an interesting turn of phrase, Luke says that Jesus then *"gave him to his mother."*

It was not primarily for the son's sake that Jesus restored his life, it was for the mother. In the previous miracle, it seems to be primarily for the centurion's sake that Jesus heals his servant.

The point of all this for me is that Jesus doesn't care whether a person is at the top of the social hierarchy or the bottom. When he said he came to bring good news to the poor and release to the oppressed, he meant it. He entered into their lives and made a difference. There were no limits to his compassion.

We know that Illness, pain, death are the great levelers. The centurion had earthly power to command soldiers, but he could not command health, healing and life for his servant. He had to turn towards Jesus for help. The mourning widow may have been surrounded by the townspeople, but still alone and at the mercy of her grief, until she stumbled upon a new dawn.

We all come to that same point, sometime in our lives. We may think we are in control, but in the end, we find ourselves in the need of God's grace and mercy, whether we are privileged or not.

Every society everywhere struggles with favoring some people over others. It seems like human nature to categorize those who look different, talk different, act different or believe different. How do we react when the doctor who comes into our loved one's hospital room has a name we can't pronounce or speaks with an accent we struggle to understand?

For most people, any initial discomfort we may feel is quickly dispelled as we fervently hope this person can use his or her healing gifts to make a difference in our loved one's life. But do we pay as much attention to the person who comes in to clean the room?

Christians are called to be salt and light for the world. The good news is it doesn't take a lot of either to make a big difference. This is one of those things we can all do right where we are. Just treat people the way you'd like to be treated. Whether they are black or white, rich or poor, CEO or janitor, Christian, Jew, or Muslim – just be kind, be gracious.

Through the centuries, millions of people have looked at Jesus' way of life and his limitless compassion and have been deeply moved to say, "*That's it. That's how it should be done.*" And that has changed the world. So let's keep moving in that direction, with love and compassion for all. Amen.