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“Unlikely Places of Faith”

A sermon by Mindy L. Douglas

9th Sunday after Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Luke 7:1-10

Sometimes we find glimpses of faith in surprising places.

I met Sharon at the food pantry supported by my former church. She was among the few people who chose to wait in the sanctuary until it was her turn to get her family’s food. She and a few others gathered in a circle in the chancel area to share stories and prayers. Her teeth were missing in many places and she wore a scarf around her head. She shared that her husband of 40 years had recently died of cancer and that she was now living with her cousin’s family and fighting her own battles with diabetes and failing vision. Her son was in jail, and her daughter was addicted to drugs. After telling more of her story—which most would consider a tale of significant hardship and suffering—she ended by saying how grateful she was for her cousin’s family, for such a beautiful day, for a place to come to get food, and for all God’s amazing blessings in her life.

“God is good,” she concluded confidently.

“All the time,” we whispered back to her.

Glimpses of faith in surprising places.

Another such person is a friend from college, a self-proclaimed agnostic, who lived on my dorm floor. She went through a very difficult time her freshman year and

for reasons unknown fully to me, took great comfort in coming to my room, lying on my extra bed, talking with me, or if I was studying, just staring at the ceiling. The door to my room was almost always open, whether or not I was there, and sometimes I would come back and find her, just staring quietly at the ceiling. One day I asked her, “What is it that makes you want to come here?” She responded, “You have a faith that makes me feel better. I want to be near it. It comforts me and makes me feel that things will be okay. If you believe in God, he must be real.”

Glimpses of faith in surprising places.

Another person of unlikely faith was a hiking buddy of mine years ago when I was in Switzerland for a summer study program. He was a German scientist named Michael. He was also a self-proclaimed atheist who could not stop talking about God. Daily, as a part of our research, we hiked high into the Swiss Alps and almost every minute of our journey was filled with theological exploration—questions and reflections, musings and more questions. He explored every theological nook and cranny he could find, and we had lively and open discussions and debates. Interesting how someone who didn’t believe in God wanted nothing more than to talk about her.

Glimpses of faith in surprising places.

Today’s passage from Luke is another story of faith in an unexpected place. In this story, the faith is found in the heart of a Roman centurion who seeks out Jesus to save the life of his beloved dying servant boy.

Jesus’ popularity had grown quickly, as we know from earlier Luke passages, and crowds gathered around Jesus wherever he went. They heard of his healings and his authority over demons. The crowds had gotten so large that at one point, friends of a paralyzed man had to creatively lower their friend through an opening in the ceiling of a crowded house in order to get close to Jesus that he might be healed. But not all were enamored of him. After all, he had violated Sabbath law and been chased out of his own hometown. But Jesus continued to teach and heal. At this point in Luke’s gospel, Jesus has called all twelve of his disciples and has

just finished preaching the Sermon on the Plain, in which he speaks about loving one's enemies and not passing judgment on others. Luke tells us that after Jesus finished his sayings, he entered Capernaum again. There he encountered an unlikely request. It seems a centurion of the town had heard of Jesus. The centurion had a slave, a boy, who was very ill and close to death. The slave was important to the centurion, though the passage doesn't explain why, and so the centurion sent Jewish elders to ask Jesus to come and heal him.

First century readers of Luke's gospel would have been scratching their heads about now. What in the world would a centurion be doing calling on Jesus? After all, centurions were a part of the Roman occupying force in Judea and Galilee. They were Gentiles. They were oppressors of the Jewish people. They were the enemy of the Jewish people, by all counts. Why would one reach out to Jesus? And why would Jesus bother to respond?

It seems from this passage that this centurion was not the norm. He obviously had positive relationships with Jewish elders and was smart enough to send them out to Jesus to issue his request. These messengers spoke on the centurion's behalf and told of his love of the Jews and how he had built the synagogue for them! He was worthy of Jesus' attention, the elders claimed. Jesus set out to meet him.

Interestingly enough, Jesus and the centurion never do meet. At some point, the centurion must have realized that Jesus' cleanliness would be compromised by entering the home of a Gentile, so he sends word with other friends for Jesus to stay away. "Just say the word," he says through his messengers. "Just say the word and I know my servant will be healed. I know how authority works. I am a man of authority. Just say the word. Just say the word."

The centurion knew well the power that came from his own position of authority. He knew well how he could command the soldiers under him with a word and they would respond without hesitation, even from a distance. They had to. But he also knew the limits of his authority and power. He could not heal the sick. He could not save his servant. But he had heard of one who could. With rare humility from one in such a position, he acknowledged the limits of his own power and his faith in the power of Jesus. "Just say the word and I know this will be done."

He was right, of course. And Jesus was amazed at his faith.

Most of the time Luke uses the Greek word *thaumazo*, or “amazed” as it is usually translated, to describe reactions of men and women to something that Jesus has done. But in this case, Jesus is the one who is amazed. He is amazed that a man who hasn’t met him, hasn’t witnessed any of his healings, hasn’t heard any of his words, isn’t of the Jewish faith still somehow believes that Jesus need but say the word and all will be well.

“Not even in Israel,” proclaims an amazed Jesus, “have I found such faith.”

Now I don’t believe Jesus necessarily thought his followers were unfaithful, or that the people of Israel were unfaithful, or even that the faith of his followers was particularly weak. It was just that in *this* man—a Gentile Roman centurion—was perhaps the last place he would have expected to find faith. His faith was a faith that circumvented the expectations of his job, his nationality, and his allegiance. His faith came from the most unlikely place—the heart of the enemy—and found its home in Jesus.

What I find remarkable about this passage is that the centurion was a man who knew the limits of his power and was humble enough to call upon a power in Jesus that was beyond his own.

Most of you know that over the last fifty years or so, many people in America have abandoned their faith or the faith of their fathers and mothers. Many of those who have left the church, cathedral, or synagogue believe that organized religion has nothing to offer them. Some have kept a faith in God apart from the church while others have found God to be impotent and absent from the tragedies of their lives and have turned from any belief in a power outside of themselves. We are strong, independent types in the U.S. who believe that if you want something done, you have to do it yourself. It is up to you to make your own success. Pull your own self up by your bootstraps. Don’t have to rely on others. Be a self-made man or woman. You have the power to build your own life.

But somewhere along the way, we all come face to face with the limits of our power. Somewhere along the way, we all realize that no matter how much power we thought we had, some things are beyond our power to fix, beyond our control to manage. Some will arrive at this point and, like the centurion, reach out to Jesus for a power beyond their own. Others will resist and fight and deny and blame.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus went to his death on the cross for all people. He was executed and put in his grave, a dead man, a defeated man, a powerless man. And God, who spoke a word and all creation came into being, spoke a word and Jesus was raised. In this word, death was defeated, the grave had no victory. God who created us and loves us defeated death for us. The power of the grave was powerful no more. The risen Lord walked among his people, and the Holy Spirit came to guide and direct us.

And so, when we get to that place where our power and ability end, we must, as people of faith, trust completely the power of God to be with us, to walk with us, strengthen us and comfort us and to be for us life in the face of death—life everlasting, healing and wholeness in this life and beyond. This is the faith of the centurion. This is the faith that amazes even Jesus.

Henri Nouwen, the spiritual writer who taught for years at both Yale and Harvard, tells the powerful story of the Flying Rodleighs, a troupe of trapeze artists who performed with the German circus, Simoneit-Barnum: “When the circus came to Freiburg two years ago,” Nouwen writes, “my friends Franz and Reny invited me and my father to see the show. I will never forget how enraptured I became when I first saw the Rodleighs move through the air, flying and catching, as elegant dancers. The next day, I returned to the circus to see them again and introduced myself to them as one of their great fans. They invited me to attend their practice sessions, gave me free tickets, asked me to dinner, and suggested that I travel with them for a week in the near future. I did, and we became good friends. “One day, I was sitting with Rodleigh, the leader of the troop, in his caravan, talking about flying. He said, ‘As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him in the long jump.’ ‘How does it work?’ Nouwen said he

asked. ‘The secret,’ Rodleigh said, ‘is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me and pull me to safety...’ A flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him.”¹

I wonder how much we want to be the flyer in our own lives—full of grace and beauty and what must certainly be power. And I also wonder if we will be able to realize when our power ends and we must stretch out our arms and hands and wait to be caught, healed, and comforted by the grace and love of our own Lord Jesus Christ. Wouldn’t that be an unlikely place of faith? Amazing.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

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¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation On Dying And Caring*, Harper, 1994