

Faith Unlikely

The Rev. Damaris D. Whittaker

Luke 7:1-10

June 2, 2013 - Camp Sunday

“Not even in Israel I have found such faith.”

Let us pray: Gracious God, we come before you with open hearts. May your word produce faith in us this morning. May this faith lead us to the healing of our hearts. We ask these things in Jesus name. Amen.

More than once, I have been driving behind a car with a bumper sticker that says “Question Authority.” In my opinion, this has almost become our national mantra or our manifesto.

There was a time that certain members of society, like doctors, attorneys, police officers, members of the clergy, even the president of the United States, were considered individuals worth of respect. However, that time is no longer here.

- Doctors are described as: self-centered profiteers, dispensers of pills;
- Lawyers: bottom-feeding sharks (this is putting it mildly);
- Police officers have been described as donut-eating slackers; hanging out at the donut shops; and
- Ministers are either con artists or naïve fools—people who do not live in the real world.

In the Gospel lesson this morning, we are made aware of a story of tremendous faith. The centurion’s faith was so grounded that he sent a servant to tell Jesus to “just say the word.” Do not bother showing up ~ simply give the order. Because, based on his position as centurion, he understood what authority was, and most importantly, he believed that Jesus had it!

While this demonstration of faith is surprising and unexpected, what is really outstanding is that it comes from a centurion. A centurion was part of the army of Rome. Centurions had a middling role in the army of the Roman empire, put in charge of about eighty soldiers. **He is one of those directly responsible for Israel’s oppression.** However, it is evident that this centurion had done some good in Israel. The Jewish leaders commended him to Jesus. One can say that there is some complexity in this person’s character -- he is part of the force that is occupying and oppressing Israel, and he builds synagogues for the townspeople

under his authority. However, when all is said and done, he still represents Roman occupation.

Perhaps we should not judge one another based on one element of who we are or were!

This past week, the United Church of Christ posted on Facebook a statement made by Pope Francis. He said, during his Wednesday Mass, that all people are redeemed by Christ's sacrifice, and invited his hearers to meet all people, whether they believe or not, at the place of doing good works. He included atheists among those who are redeemed by Christ, and this shocked many. Then, they invited us to post what we thought. Many UCC followers said that they appreciated the words; others strongly disagreed.

I personally believe that in the absence of God, there is God. "If we do not know God well, we do not realize that God may be more present to us when God is absent than when God is present."¹

After all, Jesus commends the centurion, and, in an unexpected statement, declares that "*Not even in Israel I have found such faith.*" There is no indication that this centurion becomes a follower. But, Jesus praises this astounding faith.

We have been conditioned to believe that a person of faith, possesses certain attributes, comes perhaps from certain backgrounds, and behaves in prescribed ways. When we think about our enemies, we always believe that God is on our side, and that God's love and redemption certainly is not extended to them; after all, they are our enemies.

Faith shows up in unlikely places; sometimes, even in our enemies. Moreover, God can use those who are our enemies to teach us about faith.

This morning, I also invite us to recognize that God shows up where we do not expect God to be, but also, to look inwardly and reflect on our own faith. Do we recognize God's authority to the point where we can believe that God can take care of our burden? Do we trust God enough to believe that, in the words of those old Christians, "if we leave it to God," God will take care of it?" Do we this morning, like the centurion, believe that if God's says the word, it will be done?

¹ Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*, pg 237.

I share the words of Thomas Merton:

“The wise man has struggled to find God in his wisdom, and he has failed. The just man has striven to grasp God in his own justice, and he has gone astray. But the sinner, suddenly struck by the lightning of mercy that ought to have been justice, falls down in adoration of God’s holiness: for they has seen what kings desired to see and never saw, what prophets foretold and never gazed upon, what the men of ancient times grew weary of expecting when they died. They have seen that God’s love is so infinitely good that it cannot be the object of a human bargain.”²

May our faith in God strengthen the roots of our existence. Amen.

² Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*, pg 243.