

Authentic Faith

Proper 4, Year C – Luke 7:1-10

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, June 2, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

With several things having crowded in this week, I was not nearly as disciplined about my sermon preparation as I am usually try to be. But a few things kept coming back to me as the week progressed. There are places that I have been in my life that I recognized, sometimes right away, but sometimes in a growing awareness over time, as places of holiness, as places of authenticity, as places of authority. I thought again about that chapel at the top of the Mount of Olives that I told you about a couple of months ago. I thought about the National Cathedral in Washington – not the vaulting towers, or grand entrance, or the magnificent main altar, but of the children's chapel off the west transept. I thought about a certain dogwood just outside Key Chapel at Virginia Seminary, and a scrub pine growing out of the rocks along a creek-rapids near Prescott, Arizona. At one time or another in my life, sometimes when I needed it most, and sometimes just as little surprises of grace, I have known for certain that God is present in these places.

I've told many of you that the first time I visited this place I experienced the same thing. Hallowed perhaps by the prayers of a century and a half of faithful people, I still come in here sometimes just to sit and think and pray, sure that I find holiness, sure that I find God's presence. At some point during my all too erratic ramblings this week, I was reminded of a poem by T.S. Elliot that catches, as poems do, at that idea:

If you came this way
Taking any route,
starting from
anywhere
At any time or at any season
It would always be the same: you
would have to put off
Sense and notion.
You are not here to verify
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report.
You are here to
kneel
Where prayer has been valid.

I think that's pretty much what happened with the centurion's encounter with Jesus in this morning's Gospel reading. Though the two never physically meet, this soldier, this leader of men, recognized Jesus' intrinsic holiness and authenticity and... authority.

It's all too easy to believe that everyone who met Jesus saw that. But you know they didn't. Over and over, the Gospels make it plain that there were some that thought that Jesus was just plain mad. There were those who wouldn't give him the time of day. There were still others who happily condemned him as a heretic, a blasphemer, a rabble rouser. But this centurion, he saw in Jesus the power to command, and the respect due to an authority that he could sense. And the acknowledgement of that authority is how things change for the better.

This fellow is actually liked and respected by the local Jewish leadership. They intervene on his behalf. 'He is worthy of having you do this for him,' they say. They have done their calculations of merit and worth – he has done us favors and so we think he is worthy of this favor in return. But the centurion

himself has a different attitude, 'I am *not* worthy' is what he says. There is no moral arm-twisting in this. No claims or demands, just profound trust in the compassion, the kindness, and the authority of Jesus.

And did you notice? The whole encounter takes place independently of the outcome. This man's recognition of Jesus isn't validated in the healing of his slave, but long before we know the slave has been made whole. It's all too easy to fall prey to a rather juvenile bargaining in our relationship with God. You know, 'Give me what I want and then I'll believe in you.' As if faith is a bargaining chip to gain us special favors. But that's not what the centurion does. His recognition of Jesus' authority is enough for him. His recognition of who Jesus is, is enough for him. Whatever Jesus directs, will be. And that is enough for him. And Jesus says, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.' He responds to Jesus in humble recognition that in Jesus he has finally found holiness, that he has finally found authenticity, that he has finally found real authority. Though he would not have used the words – he didn't have the evidence that we do – but that day the centurion finds the Son of God, and he needs no further confirmation.

Perhaps the unexpected faith of this outsider is one of God's gifts to the Church, and to us. Those who recognize holiness when they experience it, who recognize encounters with authentic authority, who trust themselves to that recognition, may have much to teach those of us who are usually more calculating. Sometimes we're too easily tempted towards the thinking of the elders in the story – expecting that God really even considers our calculations, and basing our faith on the fact that we have done all the right things, gone all the right places, said all the right words, all the right prayers. The Gospel writer isn't even subtle in saying to his readers, and to us, instead of some petty perversion of the real thing, your faith and mine, your trust and mine, your reliance on God *and mine* could be like this *outsider* to the kingdom of God. We need to acknowledge *his* authority. We need to trust in *his* promises. We need to rely on his grace and his mercy and his *love* for us. Simply relying on grace like this centurion, is harder perhaps, than doing the graceless calculation of merit, but it is more to the point of our relationship with the holy God. And it is oh so much more productive.

This week, because of the slip-sliding of the lectionary, we meet, perhaps for the first time in a long time, just another man, an outsider, at that, who reached out in confidence and faith. And his faith was blessed. Perhaps we should pay attention to holiness, and authenticity, and authority like that.

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