

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

2nd Sunday after Pentecost
Year A

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Text: Luke 7:1-10

Title: “The Outsiders: The Worthy”

We were all saddened this week when we all heard about the shootings in Alexandria, Virginia on Wednesday. It was good to learn yesterday that Representative Steve Scalise has been upgraded from critical to serious condition and that all the others who were injured or shot appear to be recovering well.

This event has lawmakers recognizing that the language used in political discourse needs to change, that the harsh partisanship must change. A New York Times article on Saturday announced “Democrats, Republicans Call for End to Political Vitriol After Virginia Shooting”.

Thinking about this shooting and the resulting call for unity even among those who disagree, I wondered how Jesus would handle it? What does Jesus have to say to those who think that others are on the outside and they are on the inside? What does Jesus do with those who are deeply divided by this insider/outsider mentality and the kind of harsh and bitter, condemning kind of rhetoric that can sometimes rise out of such a view? What does it mean for Christ followers in this kind of context in which a man who is so angry about the way leaders conduct themselves that he will attempt to take their lives as his only apparent solution? What does it mean for Christ followers that leaders conduct themselves in such ways using divisive tactics and language that contributes to such a man acting so violently? What does it mean for Christ followers when we find ourselves divided and sometimes bitterly so? Who is on the outside and who is on the inside?

(First service) Let’s listen to the Gospel According to Luke.

(Second service) Maybe we would do well to pray this gypsy’s prayer...(play video)

7 After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ² A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. ³ When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. ⁴ When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, ⁵ for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." ⁶ And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; ⁷ therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸ For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." ⁹ When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." ¹⁰ When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

A 4-year-old Catholic boy was playing with a 4-year-old Protestant girl near a small children's pool in the backyard. They splashed each other, got very wet, and decided to take their wet clothes off. After they stripped the little boy looked at the little girl and said, "Golly, I didn't know there was that much difference between Catholic and Protestants."

When I was a very young boy my best friend was Roman Catholic. He and I met when we were two or three when my parents began renting his uncle's home. Jim lived across the street from us then. As we grew to age 4 or 5, our lives began to include regular fishing expeditions in the large drainage ditch that ran the length of one of his father's fields just down the road from our house. There we would catch bullheads, dog fish and an occasionally a carp or two.

At age 8 I moved down the road two miles or so after my parents built a house, but Jim and I always managed to get together. As we grew still older, our parental boundaries were loosened, so we began to venture further down the ditch to a spot at which it widened and became--what seemed to two young boys--like a

river. An old utility bridge lay across it at the wider part of the ditch. It was built of two thick steel beams with 2 inch thick planking stretched across them. The bridge was one of those constructed by farmers to provide easy access from one field to another across this tree-lined ditch. The water was deep beneath that bridge. How deep we didn't know, but in our imaginations, it must have been many fathoms to the bottom where surely as yet undiscovered sea life roamed.

Before embarking on our excursions, our pre-trip routine would find us digging up some worms from the garden patch, packing sack lunches or sometimes just grabbing an apple or two off his dad's tree. Then, we'd head out for the bridge with our poles hanging over our shoulders.

When we came to the bridge, Jim had a routine. He would lay on his belly, reach down over the edge, his hair pointing straight down toward the muddy water and grab hold of the line he'd left tied to one of the steel beams. He always left a baited line there hoping that one day he'd catch 'the big one.' Usually he'd come up with a bull head, and sometimes as a special treat, he'd bring along one of his older brother's firecrackers, and we'd treat the fish to a cigar right there on that old bridge.

While we enjoyed many great outdoor adventures, Jim and I didn't discuss our personal faith. Through the years, however, I would catch glimpses of his family's faith practices and he would catch hints of ours. During Lent he gave something up for Christ and his family ate fish on Friday's. He always had to go to church. I could go to his church, but he couldn't come to mine. When I did go, I couldn't go up for Communion because I was not Roman Catholic.

Out on the bridge we could share anything. We were just two kids enjoying each other's company and God's creation. But when it came to church, we were divided, not by our own design, but by the traditions established for us centuries before.

Little did we know or care that when we were out fishing as kids, somewhere Vatican II was happening, reshaping his Roman Catholic Church dramatically. Little did we know that during those years of childhood camaraderie, Methodists were negotiating with Evangelical United Brethren to form the United Methodist Church and that someday I would be ordained as an elder in that new denomination.

Aside from all that was happening in the world of our respective churches, however, Jim and I had an established friendship which was deeper than our adherence to the divisions thrust upon us by those long-ago established traditions. And though we would hear derogatory remarks about each other's church affiliations from other friends or through the entrenched prejudices of adults, neither of us used those divisions as a stick against the other. The friendship was and is based on something more than agreement on religious ideas and principles

articulated by the church centuries before. The friendship was based on mutual respect for our differences, a common love of God's creation, a willingness to trust one another and a shared sense that God was greater than our differences.

Maybe that's why I appreciate the Gospel According to Luke so much. In this Gospel account in particular we have been given singular versions of wonderful stories that emphasize the non-sectarian nature of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the shepherds witnessing Jesus' birth, the dining with the tax collecting Zacchaeus are all unique to this Gospel account. Rich and poor, despised and privileged, those steeped in Jewish tradition and those completely foreign to it: None were exempt from Jesus' attention.

So this story of the centurion whose slave was deathly ill. Centurions were powerful people. As the name suggests, they commanded 100 foot soldiers in the Roman army. Ten centurions formed a cohort. Sixty, a legion, the head of which was called the Tribune. Those who were aggressive and skilled would first seek the rank of centurion from which he could move on to more powerful positions, perhaps even Tribune. If a man wanted to become a Schwarzkopf or Petraeus, the first important step would be to earn the rank of centurion.

Polybius, a Roman historian, described the kind of man sought for the rank of centurion: "Centurions are required not to be bold and adventurous so much as good leaders, of steady and prudent mind, not prone to take the offensive or start fighting wantonly, but able when overwhelmed and hard pressed to stand fast and die at their post." (IDB, p.548)

His duties included the discipline of the men and therefore he would administer scourgings and executions for capital crimes. His were the responsibilities to drill the men, inspect arms, oversee quartermaster duties and command in camp and in the field. For their services they were highly paid—as much as 17 times that of a foot soldier-- and granted generous bonuses when discharged from service. According to the "goarmy.com" website, the current annual salary for the lowest rank of private (E1) is \$19,198. Using that figure, a centurion in today's dollars would earn \$326,366. They were powerful men who wielded strong authority in the regions in which they worked.

At first glance you would think that the itinerant, Jewish preacher and the Roman centurion had little in common. They were from different worlds really. One roaming the country from town to town, attracting attention for his ability to connect people with God in ways that transformed their lives, for his ability to heal, to share a story which--when acted upon—turned the listener's values around, to speak of loving God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind and

loving your neighbor as yourself as if it meant life or death. The other a well-paid military commander responsible for the order of a part of the world in which the Jewish preacher did his work.

But the centurion came up against something over which he had no control: illness. The authority and wealth he possessed could do precious little toward healing someone for whom he obviously cared greatly. However, he had heard of this Jewish preacher who somehow had the power to heal. We don't know this, of course, but he may even have bumped into Jesus on the streets of Capernaum, the only place it is ever mentioned that Jesus had a home. The stories about his work were widespread, like the widespread success stories of a Mayo or Cleveland Clinics. How many times have you heard of people turning to Mayo or Cleveland out of desperation when local professionals struggled to find adequate answers to or treatment for illness?

This powerful Roman sent a group of elders to ask Jesus to help. They were Jewish leaders, coming to Jesus out of desperation. "He is worthy of your help," they say. "He even built our synagogue for us."

Apparently, this Roman officer acted as the Dow Foundation of Capernaum, a man who understood the benefits of investing one's wealth into the community in which he lived and worked. One preacher I read this week asked pertinent questions about this:

"What kind of person is this who not only is unprejudiced towards someone else, but is willing to build a temple for their religion. Imagine a Jew in Israel building an Arab mosque? Does that make sense? Or a Palestinian building a Jewish synagogue? Or a Hindu building a temple in Pakistan? Or a Pakistani building a temple for his enemies in India? What kind of person is this centurion? (- Edward F. Markquart, Sermons from Seattle (textweek.com))

Luke gives no hint of hesitation on Jesus' part. There are no questions asked about the man's faith, whether or not he even believed in God. A man is sick. His master is worthy. Jesus just goes with them.

But not long after having sent the elders, the centurion remembered a piece of Jewish law. If a Jew entered the home of a Gentile, he would be defiled, unclean. Out of respect for that law, he sent another delegation to meet Jesus.

"We've a message from our friend. He says he is not worthy to have you come to his home and that if you would just say the word, he is

confident it will be done. If I give an order, it is carried out. I trust the same is true of your authority.”

“Amazed” is the word the NRSV translates as that used by Luke to describe Jesus’ reaction. The RSV used “marveled”. Here was a man who expressed his open willingness to trust based on an understanding of authority, the likes of which Jesus had not seen in the faithful fellow Jews. Here in this man was found an openness to trust on the part of one not steeped in the tradition of the Torah. Here in this outsider, Jesus found faith not only faith but trust.

This story pushes us to recognize that devotion to God and to others can be expressed in unexpected ways through unlikely people. This centurion is neither a faithful Jew nor a follower of Jesus. He is by all accounts a true outsider, part of an occupying military force, not a member of the faith community. Neither does he have any visual contact with Jesus, yet he trusts the authority about which he has only heard. And that trust in the power of Jesus superseded any ethnic or religious or political divisions that existed in Capernaum. His trust became a bridge of sorts, a bridge which gave those of us hearing his story later an example of an unchurched outsider who trusted without having seen for himself

UNEXPECTED FAITH IN AN UNLIKELY PERSON.

In the Gospel According to John, in one of Jesus resurrection appearances he tells doubting Thomas after Thomas finally confesses his belief:

Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me?
Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

This Roman soldier is a model for such faith, and as a result, this story challenges me, challenges us because we create expectations based on our understanding of who is on the inside and who is on the outside. Examples abound: around the world ethnic groups fight against one another. As a country we continue to struggle with racism. Women continue to experience oppressive behaviors due to unchecked, archaic, male instincts. Some teens and adults continue to make unfair judgements about students from other schools or about people who live in particular parts of town. Divisions we do well. It’s the trust in God’s ability to heal us with which we struggle. It’s trust in God’s willingness to come and hold all of us with which we struggle. Even when we hear the words of another telling the story of One who comes in spite of the divisions we draw, we strain to trust the word, the possibility that it might be true.

You know, Jesus' ministry might very well have been a dim shadow in the collective memory of humankind rather than the living power of God's presence had he not successfully reached beyond his own faith traditions to those who could not be a part of them. IN this, Jesus recognized qualities of faith without regard to human divisiveness. In this, Jesus saw worthiness in those his own people sometimes could not see. IN the case of the centurion, however, even leading Jews saw something in this man that bridged the gap between this outsider and the insiders. Something more important was going on, something superseded the divisions.

There are times I'd like to go back to that bridge with a pole, a can of worms, a firecracker—well maybe not the firecracker--and my friend, Jim. We had differences there, but somehow there was something more important going on. We saw each other as human beings, not as a Roman Catholic and a Methodist. In some ways our relationship was like that bridge. We came from different places, but something greater than those differences; something more fundamental spanned the gap. For me, it was all about loving God and loving neighbor above all the attempts to divide us. It was about instinctively recognizing that he was worthy and I think the same was true for him.

I'd like to leave you with a challenge this week. Think of someone in your life who might need an affirmation or some encouragement. Someone who is going through a tough time, someone who may be feeling shabby about themselves for one reason or another, someone who needs a lift. Better yet, think of someone with whom you have some differences and who may not be your favorite person. It's not just politicians that need to work on divisiveness. Find a way to offer words of encouragement that help them to know they are worthy of God's love and yours. Text them a quick note. Handwrite a card and sent it. Use email or Instant Messenger. However it's done isn't important. Just find a way to affirm someone else that he or she is valued and loved, that he or she is worthy.