

Surprised By Faith

by Steve Zeisler

Jesus was a human being just like all of us. He experienced the full range of human emotions. We can picture him experiencing joy, love, anger, sorrow, anticipation, disappointment, gratitude. I think, though, that an emotion difficult to picture the Lord's experiencing would be surprise.

Can you call to mind a situation in which Jesus would be surprised? He was always in control. He was master of the scene no matter where he went. His insight penetrated all the deception and lies and the hidden things that those around him hoped would remain hidden. John's gospel tells us that Jesus, "knew all men... He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man, for he himself knew what was in man. "

However, in the seventh chapter of Luke we find recorded an occasion in which Jesus was surprised! Luke 7:9 refers to a Roman centurion, a man who was excluded from the best opportunities to know God:

And when Jesus heard this, He marveled at him, and turned and said to the multitude that was following him, "I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith."

He marveled at a Roman centurion, whose background and circumstances ought to have made it difficult for him to have faith, a man whose occupation prized ferocity and the ability to rely on oneself, a man whose background was paganism, a man hated by the Jews because he was a Roman. Yet, despite all the circumstances that went against him, this man was identified by the Lord as an example of faith.

Our study this morning is one of a series focusing on accounts in the gospels that remind us of the heart and character of Jesus. In this study, Jesus interacts with a centurion, saying, "Not even in Israel have I found such great faith."

Faith is an important subject. All of God's Word bears witness to that fact, and Jesus' words here emphasize the importance of the subject of faith. Let me suggest a brief definition of faith: Faith is a willingness to bet your very life on the promises and character of God. If I were to try to pick a synonym for "faith", I would choose the word, "adventure." Faith is not a dry theological concept bound up in stodgy churchianity. Faith is a risky, adrenalin-- pumping adventure. This morning we read in Hebrews 11 about how Abraham ventured out to a place he did not know, looking for a city that had foundations, taking adventuresome risks by trusting the Lord God. The best way to understand faith is to see it exemplified in a man or woman of faith, facing life as it really is.

Verses 1-10 of chapter 7 introduce us to this man whom Jesus himself identified as one whose faith deserves our attention and our emulation:

When He had completed all His discourse in the hearing of the people, He went to Capernaum. And a certain centurion's slave, who was highly regarded by him, was sick and about to die. And when he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders asking Him to come and save the life of his slave. And when they had come to Jesus, they earnestly entreated Him, saying, "He is worthy for You to grant this to him; for he loves our nation, and it was he who built us our synagogue." Now Jesus started on His way with them; and when He was already not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to Him, "Lord, do not trouble Yourself further, for I am not fit for You to come under my roof; for this reason I did not even consider myself worthy to come to You, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For indeed, I am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes; and to another, 'Come!' and he comes; and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it." And when Jesus heard this, He marveled at him, and turned and said to the multitude that was following Him, "I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith." And when those who had been sent

returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

This passage declares three things about the centurion that can help us understand what faith is, and all three things contributed to Jesus' conviction that this man was genuinely a man of faith. The first of the three I would describe as a love that crosses barriers.

Romans hated Jews openly and Jews hated Romans openly and yet this man loved the nation Israel. A chasm yawned between them yet this man loved the nation. He recognized that God had shaped their history, that He had spoken to and through their prophets, and that this people for all their disbelief had something very much of the Lord about them and he loved them. He also loved his slave. He cared for and honored his servant. Love that crosses barriers is evidence of faith. That kind of love indicates a right response to the Lord.

Now, we can examine ourselves by asking whether or not we love across barriers. I could ask you (and myself at the same time), "Do you love anyone whom another person-- one with your kind of background, yet who is not a Christian- would not love? Do you have friends of a different race or social strata, or who come from places quite different than yours, or perhaps who speak broken English? Can you name the children of people who are your subordinates at work? Do you know what their children are like? What about the juvenile delinquents in your neighborhood- the hard, unattractive kids who live near you? Do you treat them any differently than the rest of your neighbors do? If they were in trouble would they be likely to come to you for help?

Do you have any friends who are gay, or who are in jail? Have you recently had seriously handicapped or retarded people into your homes for dinner, or someone who is very uneducated, or someone whose manners are not like yours? Who are the people who drop by your house unannounced, who feel comfortable coming over without calling first? Are they people just like you?" I think many of us are not particularly effective in these things, and I certainly include myself in that evaluation. I am not particularly effective in loving folks who live outside the social barrier around me. Jesus said that sinners and tax- gatherers can love people whom they expect will love them in return. Anybody can do that. But there is something uniquely Christian about the freedom to care about people whose responses you cannot predict.

I think I was first taught this lesson by the friendship God gave me with Jack Crabtree (though not because there is anything difficult about loving Jack!) God allowed us in college to become roommates and good friends, yet our personalities, interests and social groups were very different from each other. I was a person who was active in sports; he was active in physics and logic. I used to worry about girls all the time; he let girls worry about him. I was always concerned about what others thought of me; others were concerned to know what he thought about everything. I worked hard to fit in and have people like me; he was a little mysterious by nature. He was (and I think still is) brilliant, challenging, unflappable; I was easy-- going, accepting, and easily flapped.

I think that had we not been Christians we never would have become friends; we never would have discovered mutual interests; we never would have grown to love each other. But our young-- in-- Christ baby faith allowed interest to grow across some- minor, I admit-- barriers. Eventually, a good friendship and teamwork developed between us, which I have been very grateful to God for ever since. And here in Luke 7, Jesus heard that this centurion loved people who were not just like him- one of the things by which the Lord evaluated and then marveled at the faith of this man.

Second, Jesus was also told that the centurion had built the synagogue. Now, in the first century the synagogue system was the most important institution in Judaism for spreading God's truth around the known world. The temple service and the rituals that Jews participated in excluded Gentiles. In fact, the book of Acts records a riot that took place when the rumor circulated that Paul had allowed a Gentile to come near the temple. But the synagogue system was uniquely a place where even Gentiles could come and listen to the Bible being taught. When Paul began to preach throughout the Roman Empire, the earliest Christians were Gentile believers called "God -- fearers," those who came and sat at the back or listened outside the window; at synagogues to hear the word of God taught. So in the time and place in which this centurion lived the major thing he knew of that God was using to spread light in the world was the synagogue system; and he used his money, his reputation, and his influence to build a synagogue.

All of us know something of what God is doing in the world. Certainly we know much more than this man knew. We know some of the things that matter to God, and we can ask ourselves, remembering the example of this centurion, "What is God doing that excites you, that matters to you, that you enthusiastically give yourself to? Could an acquaintance say of you, 'My Christian friend is infectiously enthusiastic about world relief'? Or are you ministering to high school kids, or to 5- year- olds in a Sunday School class? Maybe your interest is Bible translation. Maybe it is this church. Are you excited about something that God is up to, and are you involved in it? And are other people caught up in the things that interest you that are important to God?"

Unfortunately, too many Christians give time and money only on the basis of habit. They maintain the habit out of a sense of obligation, rather than because they know it matters to God and God matters to them. But this centurion cared. He consciously chose to participate. He enthusiastically involved himself in what was most apparent that God was doing.

People who are involved only mechanically are, I would suggest, those people who are most susceptible to the Madison Avenue hype that many Christians and pseudo-- Christian organizations have turned to. If you are not really excited about and involved in something for its own sake, you are most likely giving out of guilt and are susceptible to having money extracted from you by a flashy organization with its impressive mailing list, attentionriveting advertising, etc. But people with faith like the centurion's are people who know what their gifts are, who have looked around the world they live in and-- because of their love for God-- have gotten involved. Those people are much less likely to be taken advantage of, are infectiously enthusiastic and are able to engage the interest of others in what they are doing. This responsive attitude, along with his love for others, was evidence that led Jesus to judge the centurion as a man of faith.

Third, and most important, Jesus heard this man describe his confidence in Christ. Under the pressure of a life-- or-- death situation, he told Jesus unequivocally and without hesitation, "I trust you and your power. I trust your authority to accomplish good. I trust you to take care of the one I care about." He was concerned that Jesus not have to demean himself by entering a Gentile's home. So he begged the Lord, "Please, I am not worthy; don't come here. But I have utter confidence that you can do what you determine to do and that nothing can stop you."

Many of us can make the same statement. Many of us are aware enough of the Scriptures to say, "Lord, do not trouble yourself further, for I am not fit for you to come under my roof; but say the word and my servant will be healed." But most of us would add under our breath, "But come anyway, won't you? I know you can say the word, but I'd feel a lot better if you'd just come and lay hands on my friend." Our faith claims belief in Christ, but it also trusts in the flesh, in doing the best for ourselves.

We hear the Lord say, "You cannot serve God and money." That's a pretty clear instruction and we determine to serve God, but we will serve money in some of the time we have left, just in case that doesn't work.

Jesus had promised us, "I will never leave you or forsake you," and most of us believe it. But we also supply ourselves with psychological defenses and build platforms underneath us, in the flesh, just in case he ever does forsake us and we are left alone and desperate; then we'll have something else to turn to. I find myself facing this problem perhaps most frequently with my reputation. I know the Lord is committed to protecting my reputation, to honoring me in his time. It is impossible for me to get inside everybody's head and make them think what I want them to think, yet I regularly, and energetically, make sure wherever I fail, or make a mistake, that everyone hears all my rationalizations and all the extenuating circumstances. While saying I trust the Lord to protect my reputation, I expend a great deal of energy trying to protect myself. If I believe someone is trying to make people think ill of me, I will do my best to undermine his influence, while at the same time saying I trust the Lord.

You see, that hypocrisy was absent from this man's faith. With nothing muttered under his breath, with no additional "Yes, but..." or "Except for...", he said to Jesus, "You say the word. It will happen, and that is good enough for me." I think one of the sad statements in Scripture is I Kings 3:3, where Solomon is described:

Now Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David, except he sacrificed and burned incense on the high places.

He loved the Lord except... "Yes, Lord, but..." No such divided trust was in the centurion's faith, however.

Now these three things impressed Jesus, and surprised Jesus. First, the man loved across barriers. Second, he was excited about and active in the work of God as clearly as he saw it. And third, under the pressure of a difficult and dangerous circumstance he trusted the word of God and the power of Christ, and mixed nothing else in with it. These three things together are the example of faith that Jesus marveled at. As far as the Lord is concerned, faith is most evident in character, in consistent, in-depth Christian character.

There are two more observations that I would like to make. First, verse 10 is a kind of anti-climax, almost a throwaway line. The climax is in verse 9, when Jesus, the Lord, exclaims, marveling, "Not even in Israel have I found such great faith." That is clearly the high point of this account. Then Luke, the historian, adds, "Oh yeah, by the way, when they got home they found the servant healed," an "of course", matter-- of-- fact comment about the healing.

We tend to think that faith most evidently resides in the dramatic, the miraculous, the mystical. We often think, "Well, 99 percent of the time I'll live an ordinary life using ordinary fleshly human wisdom to get things done, and when things get desperate I will search for the faith to trust God for miracles." But it is just exactly the opposite in the Lord's view. What startled and impressed him was character in love relationships with people-- an enthusiasm for synagogues. That kind of thing impressed Jesus; miracles were something he could do any time. I am concerned that there are people in this congregation who are godly, beautiful, mature, faithful men and women, who do not know that if the Lord were here he would be impressed, and that they need not wish to see a vision of a 900-- foot tall Jesus to reassure themselves that they have faith.

Finally, if we were to try to distill one element common to the three aspects of the centurion's faith, it seems to me it would be humility. The Jewish leaders came to Jesus and said, "This man is worthy. He's given a lot of money." But his evaluation of himself was, "Lord, I'm not worthy. I don't deserve to have you come under my roof."

It takes humility-- genuine, self-- forgetting humility- to be undaunted by barriers to love. If I do not care what other people think of me, how they treat me, then I am not impeded in loving people from other social strata. If I'm really self-- forgetting, the barriers disappear; I can stop worrying about whether I get proper credit, or who notices, or whether my needs are being met; I can be excited about what God is doing, because I am excited about him. Real humility allows that to happen, and it is real humility that can say, "Lord, I don't need to be coddled; I don't need to have any special attention; I don't need anything except your word."

The things I have said are not meant to be a "How To" course on making faith happen. There is no such thing. Faith is a gift of God; it is not something we can generate, but it is something we can recognize. And I think we can understand the nature of faith by looking at the example of someone Jesus commends to us: a humble man who loved despite barriers to love; a man who eagerly participated in what God was doing in his world; a man who trusted Christ when the chips were down.

Thank you, Lord, for the opportunity to be together this morning to learn from one another, to sing and pray and enjoy fellowship together. Help us to understand what faith is, to thank you for it, and to receive your gift of it. Lord, we thank you that you are such a wonderful teacher, and that you care so much about us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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