

"...sed tantum dic verbo"
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Luke 7:1-17
February 5, 2017
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

At Fellowship Supper on Wednesday night, as I was giving my big sales pitch for camp at Living River this summer, I stated that, if not for having worked at a Lutheran camp in Minnesota, there's absolutely no way I would be a Presbyterian Minister of Word and Sacrament. This text reminds me that there's another institution that I need to credit for my vocation: the Roman Catholic church. I'm sure the head Lutheran bishop and the Pope would both be so pleased to hear that.

It was attending Catholic mass with my stepmother and my dad when I was a teenager that planted the seed of deep love for worship that still thrills me. I loved mass. I loved the mystery. I love the incense. I loved the ritual. Now, to be honest, our music is leaps and bounds better. And I didn't like that I wasn't allowed to take communion. And many of the sermons left something to be desired — ask me later why my stepmom is currently angry with her priest. But I loved the prayers. And I loved the ancient feel to the words. And I loved that every Catholic knew what they were supposed to say, and when.

It got to the point where I — a fifteen year-old apostate with an awesome mid-90s haircut — knew most of the liturgy. I would say almost everything along with my parents, but I'd stay silent for the communion liturgy, because I knew I wasn't welcome at the meal. So when the priest started that part, I'd stand with everyone else, but my lips would be sealed. While I was doing my little protest part, I would listen and let the words surround me, and the truth is that I was yearning to be a part of it.

Finally, the priest would say "This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper." And the congregation would respond: "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed." Just over five years ago, some of the language of the mass was changed, and all those Catholics had to learn: "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." These words, both the old and the new, of course are taken from the story of the centurion and his servant.

This little phrase from a Roman centurion says so much. As we've worked our way through Luke, Jesus's reputation has begun to precede him. He shows up in Capernaum, and it seems that word has spread about his arrival. The centurion has a servant who is very ill and needs help. The centurion was an agent of Roman oppression, but one who has been helpful to the locals. This is a bad guy, but one who has the trust of the people. So he's one of the "good bad guys." Interesting. How will this go down with Jesus?

Well, the centurion knows about authority and power. It's his job to wield it and to respond to it when his superiors are around. From what he has heard about Jesus, he believes Jesus has authority and power. The only authority and power that can help this servant. Jesus goes to the centurion's house to investigate, but before he gets there, word comes from the centurion's friends: "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to

you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed.” The centurion offers humility. He defers to the higher power of Jesus. He also stops Jesus from having to enter a Gentile home, thus making himself ritually unclean. He tells Jesus that by his understanding of power and authority — the one he has learned as a centurion — the order only need be spoken for it to be carried out.

So we’ve got this unlikely star of the story — a friendly oppressor — and then he acts very unexpectedly. The text says Jesus “was amazed” at him. Or “marveled” at him. The Greek there is usually used to describe how people react to Jesus. And here, Jesus is the amazed and astonished one. “Not even in Israel have I found such faith.”

Imagine hearing this story as one of the first to experience Luke’s Gospel in the late 1st Century. For those first hearers there were still centurions running around doing Rome’s bidding. They would have heard this “good bad guy” amaze Jesus, and they would have had to take another look at the next centurion they encountered. They would have heard loudly and clearly that the power and authority of Jesus cannot be bound. It is for everyone. They would have heard the centurion declare his unworthiness. They would have heard his faith in the power of Jesus to heal from a distance. And they would have seen a society around them still in need of healing, with Jesus not visible. They would have marveled at the whole story, and found hope for their broken world.

Still marveling, perhaps, Jesus heads to the town of Nain and his procession of disciples and followers bumps into a different procession: a funeral procession. A procession of life meets a procession of death. When Jesus saw the widow, “he had compassion” for her. In English, compassion literally means “suffering with.” In Greek, the word translated as “compassion” here comes from the word for intestines. Jesus’s crowd, fresh off a miracle and having witnessed profound faith, gets a gut punch. And here - where death and suffering cross paths with hope and faith, compassion emerges. Jesus brings the man back to life and gives him to his mother. And now the people are the ones who are amazed again.

I spent an hour on Friday talking to a consultant in New York whose company is doing research into healing. She wanted to talk about healing from a spiritual perspective. I ended up talking a lot about how healing doesn’t always have a whole to do with curing and fixing. Healing can occur even as someone gets sicker or dies. Healing can be absent, even if the body recovers. Frankly, the centurion’s servant and the man from Nain both died for real, eventually. I’m sure they appreciated the years given to them. But the gifts in these stories were given to the centurion and to the mother. Compassion. Restoration. Healing.

Another thing the first hearers of Luke’s gospel would have noticed was that Jesus was doing exactly what he said he’d do back a few chapters ago when he was in Nazareth. He’d read Isaiah from that scroll: “God has appointed me to bring good news to the poor...sent me to proclaim release to the captives...recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And then he’d told the people there that this promise was bigger than them. And then he went and healed and proclaimed and it turns out the boundaries of the promise even marveled the Lord.

Only say the word.

Where in this world is there room for a God who can heal through space and time with only a word? Where in this world is there room for a savior who gut-suffers with the grieving? When each day is a

rollercoaster of highs and lows — hope and despair — what do we find when they crash into each other? Where do we go for healing? What would God have us do in the midst of our chaos?

I think we find some help in these two healing stories. One part of the centurion's story that is unique to Luke is the fact that he never actually meets Jesus. First, the Jewish elders come and speak on his behalf. And then the centurion's friends go and deliver the message, "but only say the word..." Luke wants us to see the importance of a community willing to bear one another's burdens, a community willing to speak them aloud, and a community willing to advocate for one another. I wonder if you have asked God for healing on behalf of someone else. I wonder if someone else has carried words to God for you. We look out for each other. For those who need healing. For those who need protection. For those who need justice.

And like the widow's village, we walk with one another when there is need to grieve. When death is around, setting up camp in our neighborhood. We walk with the widow. And we are struck by the suffering of a fellow child of God. And then we bump into life.

We approach the gate and we find a God whose primary orientation is compassion. We find Jesus, who hears a vulnerable appeal for help from a non-believer and calls it "faith." We witness a sacred authority and holy power on display that we can't possibly comprehend. We hear the story of a Christ who goes where the hurting is.

And we tell the story of how this perplexing God has impacted our lives. We tell that story until we run our mouths dry. And when we run out of full sentences, we utter the words that come out when we throw ourselves fully open to mystery:

"Forgive me."

"Help me."

"Here I am."

"Peace."

"Take. Eat."

"Beloved."

"Alleluia."

"Only say the word, and I shall be healed."

Amen.