

May 30, 2010

Scripture: Luke 7: 1-10

Sermon: "In Good Health"

Today, we enter into a new church season. We begin the journey through Ordinary Time and our guide for this journey will be the Gospel of Luke. Sure we might miss a few Sundays without Luke as our guide but for the main course of our journey through Ordinary Time, Luke will be our guide and will share his version of the Good News.

I have to admit that I have always been partial to the Gospel of Luke. I don't know if it is the imagery that he uses or the simple language found in his stories or if it is simply because I like that he gives voice to the voiceless in the crowd that surrounds Jesus. Sure the disciples are there but Luke always draws the readers' attention to that character that doesn't quite fit in. That's because Luke wants everyone to understand that God's Kingdom is for everyone, rich and poor, strong and weak. Luke also wants everyone to understand that things are not always as they appear. Luke understands that through the gift of the God's Son, Jesus Christ, the weak will be made strong and the strong will be made weak, the rich will be made poor and the poor will be made rich, that God's justice and mercy will roll down like water to restore, to renew, to refresh, to bring healing, wholeness and good health to all of God's children.

Luke does this by sharing "the other person's" story, the others that get pushed to the margins, the others that get overlooked, the others that don't quite fit in, the others that just don't seem to get noticed by everyone else. Luke does this by giving voice to the voiceless. Luke does this by giving mention to the others that people would prefer if they went unmentioned. Luke does this by giving notice to the others that people would prefer if they went unmentioned. Luke does this by opening the doors for all to experience the Kingdom of God regardless of whether society deems them worthy, regardless of whether society deems them precious, regardless of whether society deems them valuable.

shepherds, women, the sick, the diseased, the tax collectors, and others to be the main characters in his stories, people who don't exactly have the best reputation or have been stereotyped by society. Characters that would only be minor characters in other stories, Luke gives them a leading role. No one is not worthy of a leading role. He even uses a Roman centurion soldier to be a main character of one of his stories to be an example of faith, to be an example of someone who "gets it", someone who represents and holds to the authority of Rome, someone who is the biggest outsider of them all sees and understands Jesus.

Luke shares with us this story of this healing of the centurion's servant, not to show us that Jesus can heal. We know that already. No there are other stories in the Gospel of Luke that do that task much better than this one. Luke shares with us this story to show us regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, that Jesus cares. That regardless of who is making the request, Jesus hears the request. That in spite of who society deems worthy of the request, Jesus offers words of wholeness and good health. Luke wants us to understand that this story is not about the healing. In fact, the healing isn't really mentioned at all. We as readers simply assume that the healing takes place.

The main reason that Luke shares this story is because he wants his community and us as people of faith living in the modern day world to realize that Jesus came for all of God's children, that Jesus came to bring grace and God's peace to all of God's children, that Jesus came to bring good health for all of God's children through the gift of wholeness, through the gift of healing, through the gift of unconditional, all-encompassing love that God has for all of God's children.. And that we are called to do the share these gifts as disciples of Christ by spreading the word, by sharing the word, by living out God's word in our lives, in our communities, in our nation and in our world.

Luke begins his story by simply saying that after Jesus had said all these things, he traveled to Capernaum. For us to understand what's going on, we need to look at our Scripture in context. Jesus has already started his ministry in his hometown and he has captured the attention, good and bad attention of the people. And so a crowd gathers and he begins to preach. He gives his Sermon on the Plain, given his teachings about the Kingdom, given his description of his ministry in a nutshell and now Jesus opens the door to God's Kingdom just a little more. He opens the door to welcome the Gentile. He opens the door to welcome the other. He opens the door to welcome those society has declared unacceptable. And he does this by going to Capernaum a known Gentile territory.

And if that doesn't shock the people enough, Jesus begins his public ministry in a Gentile territory by the healing of a centurion's servant and lifting up a Roman soldier as an example of faith, even stating that he had not seen such faith in the House of Israel. Can't you just see the jaw a dropping?!

Our story continues once Jesus reaches Capernaum by letting us know that Jesus receives word from some of the Jewish leaders who happen to live in this mainly Gentile territory that a beloved servant of the centurion has fallen ill and is dying. And they try to show that he is worthy, even if he is an outsider. They plead earnestly with Jesus but there's something seemingly behind their pleas. You see, the relationship between the Jewish elders and the Roman centurion is built on give and take, on client/benefactor protection, on the powers that be keeping things secure for the others. Knowing this, their actions and words seem hollow. The request seems to come out as "if you scratch his back, maybe he will scratch ours as well." The request for healing is a not a true request based on the understanding that Jesus can and will heal. Their request is full of empty, powerless words, spoken to gain something, spoken to change positions, spoken to gain control over someone. Their request is based on empty, powerless words that hold no promise or hope of good health or healing.

"Look Jesus, can you go take care of this situation? The guy is a good guy, even if he does work for Rome. He has built us a synagogue and he cares for the people. He tells us that he has even heard stories about how you healed others, heard stories about how you welcome all, heard stories about how you taught about God's love. He tells us that he believes in you that you are different. All in all, this guy is a good guy. So can you help us out here? You know, give and take

it sure would be nice if you could heal his servant, because then he would owe us. We sure could use this because it would be really great if a Roman soldier was in debt to us. Think of it."

I love the fact that Jesus gives no response to their request but simply goes on almost as if he didn't hear them in the first place. I like to think that Jesus simply hears that one of God's very own is in need and that a request for wholeness has been made. I like to think that Jesus went to the centurion's house because an earnest request for healing had been made, a prayerful, power-filled, hope-filled word had been spoken based on belief, based on faith, based on grace.

And when Jesus is just a few blocks away, the centurion sends word again for Jesus not to enter his house, changing the relationship. In that one simple request, the centurion acknowledges that there is something mysterious and powerful about Jesus. In that one simple request, the Roman centurion acknowledges that there is something superior about Jesus, greater than his own authority, greater than Rome's authority, greater than all the powers that be. In that one request, the centurion acknowledges that Jesus is the one true protector, the one true benefactor, the one true worthy master. All he asks is that Jesus simply say the word, that one true word that will and does have the power to restore, to heal his servant. The centurion knows the power of the words. He uses words to command his army.

But there is something different about Jesus' words. Jesus' words are not simply words to control or words to regulate. The centurion knows that Jesus' words promise more. He knows that Jesus' words “authorize health for the sick, liberation for the enslaved people, forgiveness for ... people, and good news for the poor and depressed.” The centurion trusts that that there will be good health and healing found through Jesus' word.

Through these few simple words, Luke is showing that the centurion gets it! And he gets it so much more than the group that is supposed to be in the know. Through these few simple words, the centurion shares that he understands Jesus and Jesus' mission. He understands that there is power in Jesus' words. He understands that there is comfort in Jesus' words. He understands that there is hope and healing in Jesus' word.

Jesus' words change everything. Jesus' words restore good health. Jesus' words bring healing and wholeness. And that is the promise that we have as God's very own.

Last week, we celebrated the gift of the Holy Spirit given to us as disciples of Jesus Christ and we must also remember that we were given a powerful reminder about God's word as well. By living out God's word of welcome, by living out God's word of grace, by living out God's word of love for all of God's children, we as a community of faith can bring healing and wholeness to a world that is broken and in need of Good News. By living out God's word of peace, we can bring good health to the Body of Christ, and heal the sickness and division that are tearing it apart.

We hold to the promises that although Jesus is not here with us physically, we will be strengthened, comforted and healed through the power of Jesus' words.

We are called to remember all that we have learned about Jesus Christ, to remember Jesus' words to us as people of faith, to remember that we have been named and claimed as God's very own. There is power in those words. There is hope in those words. There is healing in those words.

And those are the words that we are called to share with the people we meet.

We are called to go out into the world and heal the hurting. We are called to be the living voice of God in our turbulent world today. We are called to welcome all to the Table. We are called to be the Body of Christ, living out God's love for one another, supporting one another, and sharing God's grace with one another.

We are called to bring good health to all through the power, through the comfort, through the strength of God's word.

We are called to share God's word, to spread God's word, to living out God's word as disciples.

There is power in God's word to set the people free. There is power in God's word to heal the wounds that keep the Body from good health. There is power in God's word to restore all of God's children to wholeness and happiness.

There is power in God's word, knowing that we are claimed and named as God's own.

There is power in God's word to bring good health and wholeness to all.

May we open our hearts and our minds to God's word for us in our lives and in our faith. Amen.