

May 22, 2016

## JUST SAY THE WORD

Matthew 8:5-13

Anyone can be a go-between! Not only did the Centurion want to mediate the healing of his slave, but, in this same story in Luke (7:1-10), he included several others to go between himself and Jesus... ambassadors of his will, so to speak. First, he sent some Jewish elders to Jesus. This unnamed Roman commander of a hundred had come into favor with the elders of the town, somehow. You can imagine how, during the more tranquil months, the officers would not want their men to be idle. And, nothing would curry more favor and good will than to do whatever good deeds a community may need. So, since Capernaum must have needed a new synagogue, this Centurion had his men help the elders build it. Curious that the Romans were "unclean" to the Jewish elders, and yet, the Romans were allowed to build the synagogue. Of course, a synagogue does not need to be built "clean" the way the Temple was. Anyway, this, along with his affection for the Jewish people, made him a worthy man in their eyes. In this same story in Luke, the Elders, in making their appeal to Jesus for this man's servant, said, "*He is worthy of having you do this for Him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.*" (Luke 7:4-5) In Matthew's version, the Centurion comes to Jesus himself. He is the only ambassador. The only go-between.

It might not be unlikely that the Centurion may have grown up in the region, and had risen in the ranks of the service to his current position. It seems he lived in Capernaum – "*A Centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly...*" (Luke 7:2) Such a slave/a servant may very well have been a long-time household servant, perhaps even the man's tutor when he was a child. However he came to be such a special part of the Centurion's life, he cared enough about him to grieve over the gravity of his illness as he "*was ill and close to death.*" (2b)

"*When he heard about Jesus...*" It is not unthinkable that he may even have *heard* Jesus first-hand as he oversaw some of the crowd control where Jesus had gone. He might have actually seen Him heal and heard Him teach. If not, he had definitely heard *about* Jesus, presumably, that He could heal the sick. And something left its impression on him such that when his servant-friend became ill, he thought Jesus could make a difference. And, when he heard that Jesus had returned to Capernaum, he knew he had to act.

In Luke, the Elders of the Synagogue seemed glad to go to Jesus for him. "*They appealed to Him, earnestly...*" (Who appeals for you?) "*...He loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.*" That he loved the Jews says a great deal. Perhaps he saw a moral character in the Jews that elevated them in his mind compared to other people in other lands, with other religions. Many Gentiles did. The Jews tended to practice their righteousness more systematically. Other people hardly practiced righteousness at all! And many Romans had a great deal of respect for the moral nature of the Hebrew Law, its stories, and, its visions. There are a few scholars that have suggested that this servant may have been a Jewish-born man who had become a household servant of the Centurion's parents. It can be fun to speculate as you try to fill in some of the details or embellish the story. We can only imagine why this servant was so well-loved by the Centurion.

Now, though he is deemed worthy by the elders, he realizes that it is not proper for a Jew to enter the home of a Gentile. It would make Him ritually unclean. So...in Luke, he sends some others to Jesus as a second set of go-betweens. Their status is that of *friends*. These friends could have been Jewish people with whom he shared a special affinity, or, more likely, other Romans, perhaps some of the rank-and-file of his cohort. He sends them with very specific instructions. In Luke, they are to relate the Centurions' sense of unworthiness before Christ, and therefore Jesus should not trouble Himself to actually come to his home; in Matthew, he says so himself. But, these friends (in Luke), and he, himself (in Matthew) relates a sense of perspective about authority. He knows that when he gives an order, it is

carried out whether he is there or not. And so he expresses a belief that should Jesus give the order for the healing of his servant; the Spirit of Christ would carry it out! It was as if he believed that all Jesus had to do was *"just say the word...."* and his servant would be healed. He believed in long-distance healing. Jesus did not have to actually be present. The authority in Him was enough in the Centurion's eyes.

The Centurion expressed such a great confidence in Jesus' ability to heal that Jesus *"was amazed."* And He said to those who followed Him, (and remember, *"Great crowds"* had begun to follow Him.) *"Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith."* (Matthew 8:10) It was a non-Jew that expressed such wonderful belief. With this declaration, Jesus proclaims the transcendence of whatever barriers there may have been between Jews and Gentiles..., *with respect to faith in Him*. To think that a Gentile might be considered a person of faith at all was, for the common Jews, let alone for the Jewish leaders, a challenge hard to accept. And yet, Jesus' words suggest that the Centurion had a faith greater than any he had seen in Israel! Certainly, it is obvious that the man believed in Jesus' ability to heal. But...that he expressed the possibility of commanding the healing from a distance reveals his belief that Jesus was more than just as healer!

It is curious how this story in Luke seems to skip any command by Jesus for the servant to be healed. And in Matthew, Jesus simply says, *"Go; let it be done for you according to your faith." And the servant was healed at that hour.*" (Matthew 8:13) How and exactly when the healing happened is not quite known. But from the time between the contact with Jesus and the return to the Centurion's home, the healing had happened. Of course, anything Jesus wills is going to happen since He is God-incarnate. But realize that it was the faith of the Centurion, not of the emissaries, and not of the dying servant, that inspired the healing. And just as remarkable is the fact that the Centurion considered himself unworthy.

Compare this long-distanced healing with the healing that happened at the beginning of Chapter Eight, with the leper...the leper that Jesus *touch*ed! On the one hand, Jesus' touch was healing for the leper; while on the other hand, Jesus authority brought healing for the servant. These stories can tell us all something about our prayers... our appealing to God on behalf of others. As we make intercession even for those who may not be able, or, ready, to come to Christ themselves, our faith may affect the working of grace in their lives. We can be like the Centurion who simply appealed to Jesus for healing power and authority, and, we can be like him as a go-between. Either way, we should all believe in the magnificent healing power of Christ, and we should all hope to have a faith like the Centurion's, who entrusted himself to the power of Christ.

Paul said, *"We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making His appeal through us. We entreat you, on behalf of Christ, to be reconciled to God!"* (2 Corinthians 5:20)

We should consider ourselves as not only the hands of Christ reaching out to touch others, but, also as go-betweens, emissaries, or, mediators. It is up to us, however, to figure out those for whom we should go to Christ!