

## Season after Pentecost

June 2, 2013

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown, Maryland

Readings: I Kings 8: 22-23m 41-43; Luke 7: 1-10

*Grace to you and peace from God - Father-Son-Holy Spirit. Amen*

When you go to a Synod Assembly you hope to be inspired but you never know. The business sessions can be tedious, speakers long-winded, discussions can become tiresome and you are very likely to get fanny-fatigue. But this year I was inspired. We sat in a room with over 400 delegates from hundreds of Lutheran churches throughout the urban, suburban, small town and rural communities of Delaware and Maryland. There was a great variety in age, race, occupations, political viewpoints and worship preferences. People greeted one another and most were ready with a smile, ready to engage in conversation, sharing stories and laughter, and discovering connections through experiences, acquaintances, family and church histories. When it came time to deliberate motions, Debate was passionate but respectful. And then there was worship. Hearing all those voices sing. Watching the diversity of the people of God we go forward to receive communion. Each celebration of the Eucharist was a bit different. Music ranged from contemporary Christian music you'd hear on the radio, to traditional Lutheran hymns; a peppy rendition of the "Of Land and Seasons" liturgy (complete with Appalachian musical instruments) and at another time a wonderful African-American Lutheran gospel choir. The Assembly welcomed four new Lutheran churches in the synod and witnessed the ordination of two pastors, the consecration of a diaconal minister and the commissioning of an Associate in Ministry. A Synod Assembly like this one can feel like a glimpse into the Kingdom of God, with a rich mixture of humanity and the Holy Spirit that catches you by surprise and invites you to keep your eyes open for the unexpected that has the fingerprints of God's grace all over it.

I think when the first and new followers of Jesus heard the story about the Roman centurion and Jesus, they too had a glimpse into the heart of God. But I am also sure they were surprised, if not shocked, at what they saw. In particular, WHO was standing in the realm of God's mercy. When those original Hebrew listeners heard the word "centurion" they were likely to snarl. He's a leader in the Roman military, the brute force and enforcers of the Roman empire that is occupying their country and oppressing them with taxation and restrictions. How dare he appeal to Jesus for healing. But that's only the beginning of the surprises in this gospel story.

This Roman is not seeking healing for himself or a family member but a slave he highly valued. We do not know what made this servant so important to the centurion but he was. That seems unusual in itself. Then, rather than "heal my servant or else" coercion, this powerful Roman leader sends Jewish elders to ASK for Jesus help. Surprisingly again, it seems they, too, were not coerced to come to Jesus but came willingly. When they speak we hear yet another surprise — these Jewish leaders think this Roman centurion is worthy of Jesus's attention for he has been kind to the local Hebrews and even built the town's synagogue. A Roman who has been generous to the native Hebrews? Jesus is on his way when friends of the centurion come to Jesus to tell him that the centurion doesn't consider himself worthy to have Jesus visit him in person. Yet he still believes Jesus has the power and authority to send healing to his servant, even without seeing or touching him. And *this* unexpected faith in Jesus' power and authority even amazes Jesus himself. The servant's health is restored even though, as Luke tells it, Jesus never lays eyes on the centurion or the slave.

Yes, this is miraculous healing story, a sign of God's desire to mend brokenness and restore the fullness of life. Yes, this is an incident in Jesus ministry that clearly demonstrates that Jesus, fully human but faithfully aligned to God's will, is a channel

for the divine authority and power of God. Yes, it is amazing. But I would guess those original readers of Luke's gospel, still living under the Roman occupation, probably didn't get a warm and fuzzy feeling like we may.

Why did Jesus help one of those most directly responsible for Israel's oppression? But hold on there. That question sounds similar to those who questioned why Jesus associated with sinners, tax collectors, women, children, losers, us. Hmmmm. The extent of our Lord's love was a huge, unsettling surprise. God loves our enemies, too? There's an idea that can still unnerve us, too. Luke's original readers would be confronted with the reality that their enemy was not a one-dimensional monster and but more complex, with even some admirable qualities. This leader in the Roman legion cared about a slave. He was commended by Jewish leaders for his acts of love and generosity on behalf of the Jewish community. Despite the power and prestige of his position in the Roman military, he humbly expressed his unworthiness to receive Jesus in his home. Our Lord pushes us to see that people — even and especially those we distrust or dislike — are more complex than we allow ourselves to think. No one — not a Roman centurion, not our obnoxious opponent, not an addict whose action leave a path of pain, not the homeless person or the friend who betrayed our trust ---- NO ONE can be reduced to one attribute of who they are....NO ONE is outside the circle of God's love.

If that isn't mind-blowing enough, Jesus commends the faith of this centurion who has not confessed a belief in him as the Messiah. We have no indication that this centurion was interested in being a follower of Jesus. Another surprise to rattle us. Someone outside the church, someone who doesn't profess any particular belief in God, someone we don't like can still be a good person and do good works? In a sermon several weeks ago, Pope Francis said "all people are redeemed by Christ's

sacrifice and he invited his hearers to meet all people, whether they believe or not, at the place of doing good works. The fact that he included atheists among those who are redeemed by Christ and invited to do good works shocked many. But perhaps what we should be surprised at is not that unlikely and unexpected people demonstrate faith and do good works, but that we consider them unlikely and unexpected in the first place.”<sup>1</sup>

I’ve always loved this gospel story about the centurion. It’s the basis for the prayer we pray before communion during Lent, “Lord I am not worthy to receive you but only say the word and I shall be healed.” But it’s more than a nice story. It’s full of challenge and controversy. God regularly shows up where we don’t expect God to be. God can act through people we least expect. God never stops delighting in surprising us. God never stops nudging us to open our hearts and eyes a bit further to see that God’s love, will, and work extends much further than we’ve imagined, through unexpected people in unanticipated ways. Here is a peek into the redeeming ways of God. You don’t get glimpses of God’s Kingdom at Synod Assemblies but in our everyday lives... among people who may or may not profess Jesus as Lord.

Here is our challenge this week. Where does God surprise you? Who are the centurians in your family and life who God uses to do the Lord’s work in what they say or do? And how does your faith intersect with them... to clearly profess, “Thanks be to God.” Amen

Linda M Alessandri 6/1/13

#### ENDNOTE

1. David Lose, “Unexpected Faith” posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), May 28, 2013