

In Life and in Death We Belong to God
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Luke 7:1-10

¹ After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ² A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. ³ When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. ⁴ When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, 'He is worthy of having you do this for him, ⁵ for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.' ⁶ And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, 'Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; ⁷ therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸ For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go", and he goes, and to another, "Come", and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this", and the slave does it.' ⁹ When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.' ¹⁰ When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

I mentioned last week that this summer we will be looking at both Scripture and content from the book *Spiritual Leadership for Church Officers: A Handbook*. From that book, your bulletin cover this week reads "Spirituality is not only about religion but has something to say about how we spend our money, raise our children, run our businesses, and cast our vote."¹ This may seem like a no-brainer, yet when we're in the midst of something intense or something like drudgery, it can be so easy to forget. Plunging a stubborn toilet after doll's clothing or a Matchbox car has been flushed? Not usually thinking about God. Sifting through financial reports at work? Not usually thinking about God.

Joan Gray's book was written to help anyone in a leadership role in a church exercise their spiritual leadership skills and find their spiritual leadership voice. Her quote is intended to remind them that growing in spiritual leadership is an active process of remembering they are God's beyond the pews, too. The more spiritual leadership is exercised outside the sanctuary, the easier it is to lean into when making a decision about faucet aerators, carpet

¹ Joan S. Gray, *Spiritual Leadership for Church Officers: A Handbook* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2009); pp. 16-17.

colors, mission designees, or how to get the donated Christmas poinsettias distributed. There is also truth in this for any of us **not** actively in a church leadership role. The more practiced we are in remembering that we are God's everywhere we go, the easier it is to lean into with the rude employee, customer, friend, family member.

Our reading from Luke today has roots in the healing work of prophets before Jesus, on behalf of non-Jews (especially Syrian leader Naaman (NAY-uh-muhn) being healed of leprosy by the prophet Elisha), and so it suggests a continuation by Jesus of the lineage of Israel's great prophets. Beyond making that point, this healing of the slave of a Roman guard, or centurion, because of the guard's faith in Jesus, serves to show the Jews how deep and expressive faith can be. If the Roman guard can do it, surely you can do it, too. In our context the story of the Roman guard serves to show us how to be faithful beyond our worship, in daily living. As Professor Gregory Anderson Love explains, "Together, verses 2-6 describe a man who is hospitable, generous to those around him, compassionate toward those weaker than him, and kind toward those of different ethnic groups – thus fulfilling the law and Jesus' ethical commands in the Sermon on the Plain."² And Jesus praises him.

When Jesus says to the gathered crowd, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith," the aim is not to shame them but to encourage them. "This, this hospitality, this generosity, this compassion, and this kindness, these are what matter," says Jesus. To us, he might add, "Don't get derailed when things get intense or dull – remember that I am **always** calling you to hospitality, generosity, compassion, and kindness. You were made in the image of a God who is hospitable, generous, compassionate, and kind. Don't forget that." Joan Gray might say, "When you are spending your money, be generous. When you are raising your children, be kind. When you are running your business, be hospitable. When you are casting your vote, be compassionate."

If you've been in a church (or a synagogue or a mosque or a temple) for any period of time, none of this is new to you. Sometimes we learn new things when we come to church but the greater point of coming together as church is to be reminded again and again of what we already know. Be hospitable, generous, compassionate, and kind. Did you make it all the

² *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3*, p. 94.

way into Sunday afternoon remembering this in all your interactions but then forgot? That's okay – we'll remind each other again next Sunday. Did you make it all the way to Thursday remembering this in all your interactions but then forgot? That's okay – we'll remind each other again next Sunday.

But you don't have to wait until Sunday, sitting in the pews, for your reminder. It's in the soldiers who gave their lives for others, whom we remember this weekend. In the stranger pumping gas at the next pump who greets you with a friendly "Hello." In the trove of YouTube videos of people doing nice things for other people.³ The obituaries of kind people. The person in front of you at the store who doesn't seem the least bit annoyed at the first person in line who is slowly sorting coupons and slowly counting coins. The books of Dr. Seuss or an episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. God has made us each to be hospitable, generous, compassionate, and kind, and when we're not at our best, someone is – we just need to look for that person. And, sometimes, **we** are that person. It's a pretty awesome, connected world in which we live.

And if that person seems elusive to you on the streets and in the stores, you can always come back to Luke 7. We can look at the centurion, or we can look at the Good Samaritan. If all else fails, we can look to Jesus, the greatest reflection of God's image, of God's hospitality, generosity, compassion, and kindness. He saw everyone as children, beloved children, of the same God, brothers and sisters to him and to one another. We come to know God in the words Jesus spoke, and, even more so, in his actions. We are called to be mindful of both. There's an internet gem which serves as a reminder for me, for it points me to the way Jesus lived, and the way I hope to: Your life as a Christian should make nonbelievers question their disbelief in God. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Hospitable, generous, compassionate, and kind God, remind us that we share your image, we pray. Amen.

³ Seriously, go to YouTube.com and type in "people being nice" in the search bar.