

“From Weird Through Freaky to Amazing”  
The Reverend Michael L. Delk  
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 4C) – 28 & 29 May 2016  
Luke 7:1-10

A Centurion led 100 Roman soldiers. Not a negligible force now; but back then, formidable, and becoming the commander of such a large cohort took courage, reliability, resolute loyalty, some measure of success in battle, ambition, a healthy ego, and keen political instincts. Centurions formed the backbone of the Roman command structure, sort of the way senior NCO’s do today, and they understood that and took great pride in their prominent role in Rome’s military conquests.

In the eastern Mediterranean, on the outer edge of the Empire, Centurions and their soldiers kept the peace and facilitated commerce and collected taxes, three interrelated enterprises to be achieved by whatever means necessary, including the use of overwhelming force. Hence, Roman soldiers, especially Centurions, were distrusted, disliked, and even despised. They served as symbols of oppression and extortion and violence, and without doubt, some of them reveled in the arbitrary power and authority over the populace that came with their station.

This only goes to show how incredibly weird the Centurion stationed at Capernaum was. Shucking off the sinister superiority of many of his colleagues, this nameless Centurion genuinely cared for the well-being of the people under his charge. He listened to them, took interest in their religion, and supported their community, going so far as to build a synagogue for them. All of this was revealed by the Jewish elders sent to Jesus asking for help in healing one of the Centurion’s slaves close to death. They described him as worthy and loving, but let’s back up for a minute. He asked for help?

OK, this Centurion just officially graduated from weird to freaky. Asking for help, that's a sign of weakness, of vulnerability, a contradiction of the self-sufficiency expected of him, but not only did he ask for help. He sent a delegation to request it from Jesus, a wandering Jewish preacher and wonder-worker, who only recently started his public ministry. What's more, he sent representatives, not once but twice, because he felt unworthy to be in Jesus' presence. That's astonishing humility for someone in such a proud post. And the second set came with a message so surprising that "When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him." Now let's pause for a second to reflect that Jesus experienced and expressed the full range of human emotions, but this is only one of two times that the gospels describe him as being amazed.

What amazed Jesus? The Centurion told the second group of emissaries to tell Jesus. I'm not good enough to have you come into my house, and "I did not presume to come to you," but you're powerful like me. I give orders, and people follow them. You work the same way, Jesus, so just the say the word, and I know that my sick slave will be healed. That's astonishing. A Roman Centurion asked Jesus for help, full of faith that Jesus could and would heal the dying slave, because he identified with Jesus as an equal, perhaps as more than an equal, and Jesus proved him right. The slave returned to health, and Jesus proclaimed that so far, in all of his travels, nobody's faith matched this Centurion's.

What's happening here? How did a guy like this become a Centurion in the first place? Ready to expose his weakness, his need, in front of the people he'd been sent to control, compromised his ability to do his job, and more importantly, where did he get this humble faith in Jesus? We just don't know. The text tells us nothing but the basic facts. Not even the Centurion's name is recorded for posterity. The only reasonable explanation for this weird, freaky, amazing Centurion is that somehow God's Holy Spirit was working through this Gentile,

this agent of imperial dominance, and brought forth in him an unparalleled faith in Jesus, maybe without the Centurion's full awareness of the gradual yet profound transformation of his soul.

This gives us hope. If God can inspire a Centurion to radical generosity, compassion, and humility, then it can happen to anybody, despite circumstances, regrets, shame, or fear. There's just nothing that can stop God from working in somebody, puncturing the balloon of pride so that there's room to ask for help without concern for the vulnerability it shows or how others might view that as weakness.

There's a deep freedom in that, a glorious liberation from the expectations foisted upon us by society. God working in us dispels the illusion of independence and replaces that delusion with the reality of our total reliance on God. It is a fearsome experience, because it exposes our foolish pretense of control, but the humility that emerges from this conversion brings peace. Knowing where we are in relation to God keeps us from getting lost by rooting us in a truth that will never fail us. This is the hope given to us by the Centurion's amazing faith, yet the same story that brings us hope also challenges us.

The first challenge involves how we handle challenges. We assess them, weigh our options and the resources we can bring to bear, make plans, and act as effectively as possible. Many challenges in life can be overcome in this way, but when it comes to faith, this process just doesn't work. While our response to God's initiative is very important, faith is a grace we receive. We can't produce faith by a sheer act of will. In fact, our will must be surrendered, subsumed into God's Will, a sacrifice that makes us humble enough to accept faith in Jesus and seek his help without shame. When it comes to faith, if we can reject our preconceptions about how we meet challenges, then the other challenges to faith wither in the light of God's love alive in us.

One-hundred men relied on the Centurion for wisdom and strength in the toughest situations. They trusted that somehow he would find a way for them to survive victorious or endure a noble death. Either way, one day, he would lead them home. What they probably didn't know was that their Centurion relied on someone else to bring him home, someone not part of the Roman military hierarchy, but a relatively obscure Galilean to whom the Centurion ascribed a power superior to his own, the power to heal and make whole, even from a distance, despite the unworthiness of the man asking for help. God emptied his ego to make room for something else, and for some mysterious reason, he allowed it. God's working on us, too, taking us on a journey from weird through freaky to amazing. Sometimes, we don't even notice. Just let it happen. Amen.