Children’s moment

Clean your room! Now! Says Mom. Do you do it? Or do you put it off? (or ask in another way, the adults in the congregation) (prop—broom, rag, etc.)

Or tell the Pine Cone story (prop—pine cone)

Matthew 8:5-13

Last week, Jesus healed the man with leprosy. This man was an outcast within his own community or people because of this skin condition. So Jesus touched him and made him whole so that he could be presented to the authorities and reinstated into the community of faith. I’m sure you heard the question: Who have we excluded from our faith community? How have we received them back into our church?

Now let’s consider today’s scripture passage. This week we will look at three ideas based on this scripture reading:

1. A centurion’s concern for a “slave,” or “son”
2. Jesus’ acceptance of a foreigner’s faith, and
3. Long distance healing

“Who’s in charge here?”

The policeman suddenly appeared in the doorway. Everyone stood still. It had been a wonderful party up to that point; a bit riotous, perhaps, but great fun. Now, we guessed, one of the neighbors had complained about the noise.

The student whose house we were in looked sheepish. ‘Well, nobody’s in charge exactly,’ he said, ‘but it’s my house.’

“Well,” said the policeman, “I’m in charge now; and I’m telling you this noise must stop right away.” With that, he left. And so did we. The party was over.

Of course, he had the authority, whether we liked it or not. He had the uniform, the police radio, the law to back him up. He knew it and we knew it. It didn’t take any special insight to see it, or courage to respond. That was just the way it was.

But when Jesus came down from the mountain after the sermon he had no uniform. No structure to back him up. No one else to appeal to. Matthew told us, at the end of the previous chapter, that the crowds were astonished because, when Jesus taught, he appeared, like the policeman in the doorway, to have authority. But was he just trying it on? Was he really ‘in charge’? what might that mean?

Jesus, being God’s son, knew that what he said came from his Father. He exhibited that quiet authority known only to a select few who are intimate with God through prayer and a life spent following Jesus.

First, let’s consider this centurion’s asking for healing of a piece of property. Yes, slaves were thought no more of than furniture or an animal. Aristotle, talking about the friendships which are possible in life, writes: “There can be no friendship nor justice toward inanimate things; indeed, not even towards a horse or an ox nor yet towards a slave as a slave. For master and slave have nothing in common; a slave is a living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave.”

So the ancient idea was that this centurion should not have cared whether he was ill, dying or just being idle. Yet this leader of 100 Roman soldiers came to Jesus and asked for healing. Now some translators have used the term ‘son’ rather than ‘slave,’ but the impact on the 1st century reader hits the mark by uttering the term ‘slave’ since slaves were just a piece of property which they could treat in any manner that the master wanted.

What made this centurion break with the norm for that century? It’s possible that his being stationed in the city of Capernaum where he dealt with the Jewish leaders and heard some of their theology had influenced him. And the centurion observed the confidence and “authority” that Jesus exuded.

It is quite clear that this centurion was an extraordinary man, for he loved his slave. It may well be that it was his totally unusual and unexpected gentleness and love which so moved Jesus when the centurion first came to him. Love always covers a multitude of sins; the man who cares for men is always near to Jesus. As our Colossian text confirms that love is what all Christians should seek.

From The Interpreter’s Bible

“The emphasis of the story is on the centurion’s faith. He may not have believed that the universe is kind but he was ready to believe in the power of Jesus. If he used the word “God” in any sense as Jewish religion used it, he believed that God is good, and that he intends abundant life for his children. Perhaps he had learned from Jewish friends to look for the Messiah, and found in Jesus that awaited deliverer. Certainly his heart went out in trust to Jesus. So fully did he trust that he was ready to stake all his hope on Jesus’ power. As a centurion commanded soldiers, so Jesus could command the forces of good to the expulsion of the alien evil and disease. This faith was a far cry from Roman pride and the worship in pagan temples.

“He (the centurion) could have been brutal to his servants—Caesar once apologized for feeling pity for a slave—but instead he sought the help of Christ for a favorite servant. He could have trampled on the prejudices of the Jews, but instead, he understood and acknowledged them: **I am not worthy** may mean that he knew that a Jew believed himself to be defiled by entering a Gentile home, and that he regarded the prejudice at least with understanding. He could have trusted only in brute force, but he was a man of faith and aware of a spiritual world. He had learned to cross lines of class, nation, and creed. Not strangely Jesus rejoiced in him.”

Who of you were in the military? Thank you for your service. Even though I was called up before the draft board for an examination, I was declared an F4 and sent back to teach school in Artesia, New Mexico. But my second son signed up for the Marine Corps and served 5 years. According to him, whatever the drill sergeant said, you did, no questions. In that way I can relate, as well as those of you who served our country, to this centurion who showed faith in his soldiers to do what was commanded. Jesus found this faith of an “outsider” exceptional—even more so than his own people.

Now this is the first hint from Matthew that Jesus’ teachings are not just for the Jewish people, but for the whole world. He even went so far as to say that some Gentiles would sit down at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob rather than persons of his own faith. That brings me to ask the question, “Do we only serve those in our own faith community, or do we include people outside our faith?

If we only accept persons within our faith, we make God too small and try to limit God. We are not god and yet it is easier to include those of like minds. Who have we excluded from the good news of Jesus Christ? Is it homosexuals; alcoholics; spiteful folks; tourists; Muslims; prisoners; refugees? You get the picture. Jesus has accepted this military officer from probably a different faith background who has shown more faith than some of those in Jesus’ nation. We are to do likewise—accept those on the margins of faith or society. Welcome them in the name of our Lord whether they convert to our way of thinking or not.

In fact, the centurion’s knowledge of the Jewish laws prohibiting Jesus from entering his abode clued Jesus even further that this man was sympathetic to the religion of the area unlike others of his ilk. Yet it is pointed out that centurions throughout the New Testament showed kindnesses toward this newfound faith. (list some)

Also, this centurion asked only that Jesus speak the word and his servant would be healed. Long-distance healing! We just witnessed Jesus healing the leper by touching him. And Jesus’ loving touch has transformed our lives. But long-distance healing without even being able to see the slave? That demonstrates Jesus’ power and confirms his relationship to God, the father of us all.

People have tried to read thoughts and to have miraculous healings without knowing who might be praying for them. Yet not all healings happen in the way we suggest to God, do they?

I prayed, others prayed, for my daughter’s mother’s healing. God heard our pleas, but did not answer in the way we wanted. God knows we are praying for our Muslim brothers and sisters who receive hateful slurs when radicals misuse the name of Allah for terrorist purposes. Jesus told us that we would have the poor with us always, but can’t something be done to sway political systems which turn a deaf ear to the plight of so many citizens?

Jesus calls us to follow him by reaching out to the homeless, the destitute, the criminal, the ill, and those who haven’t heard the Good News and experienced the joy of following our savior and our God. You and I must be the hands of faith and proclaim the acceptable year of our Lord. We are charged to increase our faith even as the centurion did when he approached Jesus. Our faith must be seen by others and we must act, not as this world would have us act, but as God through Jesus would have us reflect our relationship with Him.

When we share the body and blood of our Lord through the institution of Holy Communion, we are joining with brothers and sisters of many faiths in remembrance of this holy act. May this be a holy and solemn moment as we consecrate ourselves to the God work of letting the world know that we are set apart for joyful obedience to the work set before us.

But before we come to the communion table, we have the sacred act of giving our tithes and offerings to God for kingdom work here in Skagway and on the mission fields. May the ushers come forward.

What story could illustrate the centurion in modern terms?

Jesus’ encounter with a centurion (8:5 – 13) demonstrates that even Gentiles recognized his authority. When a Gentile centurion came to Jesus regarding his sick servant, he said simply, “Just say the word, and my servant will be healed ” (v. 8). The centurion’ s faith in Jesus’ authority amazed even Jesus, who said, “ I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith ” (v. 10). Thus, Jesus returned to a familiar theme throughout this gospel, namely, the rejection of Israel and the Gentiles’ inheritance of the kingdom of heaven (vv. 11 – 12).