

“ON SECOND THOUGHT”

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Pentecost, May 29, 2016

Text: Luke 7:1-10

I like how the centurion had second thoughts.

At least, in Luke’s version of this story (Matthew also tells it) the centurion had “second thoughts.”

At first, it had seemed so obvious what he should do. He had a valuable servant who was near death. He heard that power was coming out of Jesus and healing all sorts of people. Why not get Jesus to heal his servant? 2+2=4, right?

His being a foreigner, however, was a wrinkle in the plan. The power to heal was not secular, and the Jewish faith was not his religion. But surely he deserved some sort of return on his generosity to the local people? Even though he was a mercenary, a foreign captain in the army of the unpopular king Herod Antipas, he had been very good to the local people. He had even built their synagogue for them! They liked him! Thus he ironed out the wrinkle in his old-order thinking.

So he put plan A into effect: He sent some of the local elders who really liked him to ask Jesus to help. Off they went. They met Jesus and built their case: “This man is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves “our people,” and it is he who built our synagogue for us.”

Jesus must have been amused. He was not in the habit of expecting payment for what he did for people. Judging from the stories we know, Jesus healed people not because they deserved it but simply because they asked him believing he could and would. I can’t remember anyone else going up to Jesus and saying, “I’ve been really good; please help me.”

However, no harm done. Jesus does not seem to have taken umbrage. He set off to the centurion’s

home with the Jewish elders who had made the petition.

Meanwhile, though, the centurion was having second thoughts. He reflected on what he had just done, and he realized he was going about this the wrong way. Entirely.

If Jesus could really heal his servant—and he believed he could—then wasn’t it preposterous to make some sort of equivalence between the favors he had done in his spare time for the local people to keep them happy, on the one hand, and the creator of the world intervening to save his servant from death, on the other hand? The centurion seems to have been stricken with remorse for his presumption.

So he went to Plan B. this time, he just sent some “friends” who put the request in entirely different terms. These friends met Jesus and delivered this message:

Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. 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.

Notice the amazing difference. The rationale behind Plan A was that people get what they deserve. “I have been good; so God should be good to me.” The rationale behind Plan B, if you can even call it a rationale, was “Jesus is Lord. Praise him for his authority, and beg him to help.” It is not really a rationale. It’s more what you might call . . . faith!

With his second thoughts, the centurion stepped out of one kingdom into a different kingdom. It was like going through the looking glass. Or through the back of the wardrobe, if you've ever read the Narnia Chronicles. He stepped into a universe parallel to his own, in which things were just the same, but vastly different. It was as though he entered . . . the kingdom of God.

In the kingdom of this world, people get what they have coming. Except, because of sin, lots of times they don't. Period. That's the way of this world. You snooze, you lose. When the going gets tough, the tough get going. A thousand aphorisms express the fact that the world can and must operate on a payback system, but that it is also common for that system to break down so that people do not receive justice. This difficulty about the kingdom of this world is expressed in the Bible: "Why do the wicked prosper?" And why do good people suffer? Why do the rich get richer and the poor get poorer? And the Bible's answer? Because of people. Because we sin much. Because we fail to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

We all live in that kingdom, and are usually content. We think, for example, that we deserve the good things we have. I deserve to have my nice house, and the choice of any foodstuffs in any of ten grocery stores. I deserve that. After all, I'm an American! I like living in the kingdom of the world. I like my slice of existence. Life is good.

But the kingdom of God is not founded on such logic. It is founded instead on the mercy of God. This is what the centurion thought, when he came to his senses. Within that logic, there are only two kinds of things to say to God. First, to acknowledge God's goodness and love. Second, to ask for God's mercy upon us.

You've heard me say before—those are the two parts of the Lord's Prayer. In the first few petitions, we ask God to be Lord over all things, because, after all, the kingdom, the glory, and the power belong to

God. In the rest of the petitions, we ask God to be merciful to us, take care of us, give us—out of mercy—everything that we need.

There are only two things to say to God, and neither of them is not "I've been good" or "I'll be good" or "I devote myself to you" or "I'm a really good Christian." The centurion, when he realized how foolish he sounded first time around, did better the second time. He said the right things. He said, "God is great, you Jesus are the power of God, you have only to speak and it will be done." Then he said the other thing: "Please help me."

Liturgically, we say only those two kinds of things on Sunday as well. Everything we say is either words of praise and thanksgiving or words of petition, and none of it is founded on offering something special to God to get him to do what we want. We say "Lord, have mercy." "You are Lord"—the first part; "have mercy"—the second part. And if we don't use the Kyrie to say it or sing it, we find other words for the same sentiment. Our hymns praise God for his power and love and mercy. Our intercessions offer nothing but our need.

I don't know why people (and I include myself in this) go back over and over to the first logic, the world in which we get what we have coming. But I know why we return to the truth. Because we have seen God's Son on the cross, given for us, receiving not what he deserved but what we deserved, and giving us not what we deserve but what he wants to give us—health, wholeness, peace, the forgiveness of our sins. We see Jesus, as the centurion did long ago, and seeing him we see God, and we love God because God has loved us. Amen.