

Pentecost 2 [Pr 4]      5/29/16  
Luke 7:1-10              C

“I TELL YOU, NOT EVEN IN ISRAEL HAVE I FOUND SUCH FAITH.”

In 1526, Martin Luther wrote a tract entitled, “Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved.” He wrote it to correct the wrong thinking and teaching of the day that Christians cannot serve in the military; in fact, a number of Protestants, notably the Anabaptists, were teaching that it was even sinful for a Christian to serve in the military. So, Luther wrote, that as Paul teaches in Romans 13, civil authorities do not bear the sword in vain, but rather, God has entrusted the sword to the civil authorities to maintain peace and protect her citizens. Luther notes that a soldier fighting in war is not fighting for person gain, but fights to defend the life and property of his neighbors.

And, Luther, being Luther, gives soldiers a prayer to pray, that reads,

“I know and have learned from your gracious word that none of our good works can help us and that no one is saved as a soldier but only as a Christian, therefore, I will not in any way rely on my obedience and work, but place myself freely at the service of your will. I believe with all my heart that only the innocent blood of your dear Son, my Lord Jesus Christ, redeems and saves me, which he shed for me in obedience to your holy will. This is the basis on which I stand before you. In this faith I will live and die.”

I share that with you on this Memorial Day weekend Luther’s words help us understand our Gospel this morning. In the delegation of Jews who come to Jesus, we see self-righteousness, the thinking that our works make us worthy before God. In contrast, we see the faith of the Roman centurion, who as Luther teaches us in His prayer, knew he could only approach God **in faith**.

At the time of Jesus, the Jews hated the Gentiles, especially the Romans who occupied their homeland, making them servants in their own land. So, it is commendable, in a sense, that the elders of the Jews in the Gospel went to bat for a Roman centurion.

And yet, the sinful thoughts and inclinations of their hearts showed itself in the words of their request. They assured Jesus that the man was worthy of his loving action, "He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nations, and he is the one who built us our synagogue." Their whole plea was based on what the centurion did. They judged his worthiness on the basis of his works.

Sadly, the way we poor, miserable sinners define worthiness is not how God defines worthiness. In our text, the Jews who came to Jesus defined worthiness by their fallen, human standards. "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned," the Bible says (1 Cor 2:14)." The sinful flesh is works righteous. And, it showed so clearly in the words and actions of the Jews in our lesson.

In sharp contrast to the works-righteousness of the Jews, the Roman centurion knew that he was not worthy, "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." He did not even consider himself worthy enough to approach Jesus in person.

The Roman centurion saw himself as God saw him by nature, apart from the righteousness of Christ. God saw his sin, his failure in his thoughts, words, and deeds to live by God's will. This Roman soldier knew the truth of Scripture, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands;

no one seeks for God. All have turned away ... no one does good, not even one (Rom 3).” He knew his sin made him unworthy before God.

The Centurion knew that he could not approach God on his own merits. He knew that He could only come in faith, trusting in the mercy of God. The centurion showed absolute faith, genuine trust, in Christ. The Roman centurion had faith that merely a "word" from the lips of God, the same words that set in place the heaven and earth at creation, could heal his beloved servant.

To stress his own unworthiness before the Lord Jesus Christ and show his faith in the power of the word of God, he confessed, "For I too am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, 'Go,' and he does; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." What he means is this: If he as an unworthy, sinful human, with other men in authority under him, can accomplish so much merely by speaking words, how much more can the Lord, the Almighty, Sovereign God, command illness to be gone and health be restored! He shows absolute trust!

In the Roman Centurion, our Lord is teaching us what makes us worthy before God, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." Jesus praised the faith of this Gentile soldier to teach those who thought they were going to be saved by their works that God desires faith. We are not saved by works, but by faith in Jesus Christ. God says through the Apostle St. Paul: "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the law (Rom 3:28)."

When we were slaves to sin and held captive by the grave, God sent His own Son to pay the price for our sin. "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8)." We are not made

right with God by our works, merits, not by our own righteousness; we are worthy before God because the blood of Jesus Christ, the innocent pure, Lamb of God, atoned for all of our sin.

When the Roman centurion came to Jesus, he did not come boasting of his own accomplishments, expecting a reward from God for his great works. He came in humble faith. He came trusting that God would not deal with him according to his sin, but in accordance with His grace in Christ Jesus.

The book of Hebrews teaches us, "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb 11:6). We are not born with faith. We cannot decide to have faith. So, in the rebirth and renewal of Holy Baptism, God works faith in us so that we trust, rejoice, and find comfort in Jesus alone.

I am certain that it most certainly was difficult for this Roman army officer to admit that he faced a situation he could not control. He couldn't order his servant's illness to leave or order anyone to heal him. He knew he was helpless in the situation. The only thing for him to do was to trust in the Lord.

As we journey on life's way, when all is well, our sinful flesh often fears, loves, and trusts in our abilities, our strengths. But, let the rains come upon us, let the wind and waves beat upon us, and our helplessness becomes all too known to us. Let there be problems in our jobs, let the bills pile up, let our family relationships become strained, let our spiritual or physical health fail us, and we see that to fear, love, and trust in ourselves is to fail.

But, our faith looks to the good and gracious will of God. We fear, love, and trust in Him above all things. Clothed in Christ's righteousness, "let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may

receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16).” God acts in our time of need. He removes that which causes our tears. Or, if it so pleases Him that we should carry the cross, He gives us grace to bear it, knowing that it is for our good and that some day He will wipe away all of our tears in the mansions of heaven. In all things, we look in faith to Jesus, the Lamb of Calvary.

To God be the glory.