

THE SUMMONS
Randall Tremba
May 29, 2016
9th Sunday of Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Luke 7:1-10

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death.

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Here's a story about Jesus. It's not intended to entertain although it may. It's not intended to evoke adoration for the historic Jesus like some hero or to prove Jesus is the one and only true prophet or the one and only Son of God.

Gospel stories reveal the spirit of Jesus, which is the same spirit in our own hearts. There is one spirit. The spirit in Jesus is the same spirit in us. Our situations differ dramatically; but the spirit is the same.

Gospel stories reveal the possibilities of compassion. Gospel stories nudge our hearts toward love.

This is a story about loving an enemy even when we're not sure that's a good idea. Jesus was caught in a moral quandary not unlike the quandaries we are often caught in. It's not always clear what love requires of us.

Once upon a time Jesus received a summons to a Roman centurion's home. Which raised the question: *to go or not to go.*

There were many reasons not to go. For a Jew like Jesus, aiding a Roman was aiding and abetting the enemy. Treason.

The Romans were a foreign occupying force in the land. Roman garrisons were everywhere. Roman soldiers enforced confiscation of land and commodities to enrich the Empire, which impoverished the people of the land.

Roman soldiers could do pretty much as they pleased with Jewish men and women, boys and girls. And so they did what all occupying forces do and have done with children.

Roman soldiers frequently hung rebellious Jewish men on crosses along busy roads. Jesus himself would eventually hang on one. He would be just one of thousands of Jewish young men publicly executed by the Romans to deter terrorists.

Jesus received a summons to a Roman centurion's home. Going could muddy Jesus' reputation with his own people. It could even be a trap.

A centurion was a commander of a hundred Roman soldiers. Centurions were powerful, privileged, and rich. Centurions got or took whatever they wanted.

Jesus received a summons to a Roman centurion's home. You know, the way someone we don't particularly like, or someone who once hurt us, or someone we'd rather not be seen with starts tugging on our hearts. And that, too, is a summons of sorts.

To go or not to go that is the question.

Jesus received a summons to a Roman centurion's home to heal the centurion's slave, or as some translations put it, "his boy." Which raises the question even more: *to go or not to go.*

Would going condone the enslavement of boys? How can we figure how the difference, if any, between what is morally right and what is kind?

The centurion feared or respected Jesus too much to ask on his own behalf. So he sent others to make his request for him. He got a Jewish messenger to ask Jesus for him. The messengers told Jesus that this centurion was a good guy. He paid for our synagogue, they said. We owe him a favor. He's valuable to us.

Is that a reason to go or not to go? How can we figure out the difference, if any, between what is morally right and what is kind?

Can money buy favors? Apparently so. And what kind of world is that? Would Jesus condone it? How can we figure out the difference, if any, between what is right and what is kind?

Can the rich and privileged get health care when others can't? The centurion's sick slave wasn't the only sick body in town that day. What about those who had no rich and powerful advocate? Why should Jesus heal one but not the others? Why should the rich get favors others don't?

Yes, Jesus loves the little children of the world, red and yellow black and white. But what about Republicans? What about socialists? What about Nazis or ISIS terrorist? Yes, Jesus loves people of all colors. But what about Wall St. bankers or school yard bullies?

To go or not to go, that is the question. Would Jesus go or not?

Jesus went.

Apparently, "love your enemies" got the best of him. Do unto others as you have them do to you would guide his decision.

So Jesus took a step toward the centurion's home. And that first step told the centurion all he needed to know.

Roman messengers rushed from the centurion's house with a message from the commander: *Come no further. I am not worthy for you to enter my house. Only speak the word and let my servant be healed.*

And that stopped Jesus in his tracks. He was truly startled.

He might have launched into a lecture of who is worthy and who is not. Many of us would have. But Jesus didn't take that bait.

Jesus stopped in his tracks. He was truly startled by what he heard from the centurion. For he had seen faith he didn't see in his own people who loved to brag about their own faith in the one true God.

I've never seen such faith, Jesus exclaimed.

And what would that faith be in? I don't know but I can guess. The Roman centurion had been trained to trust the authority of Rome, its muscle and its swords. But somehow this centurion had come to trust a greater authority—the authority and power of love to heal not only one sick child but to heal a sick and broken world. Not the sword but the word.

Only speak the word and let my servant be healed.

And what is that word? I pretty sure you know. (The word is love.)

Once upon a time Jesus received a summons to a Roman centurion's home little knowing that the centurion had received a summons too.