

Yearning for Something Higher

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Michael Slayter – Director of Stephen Ministries
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

Hebrews 11:1-3 “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.”

Romans 1:16-17 “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jews, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

Luke 7:1-10

“When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. There, a centurion’s servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, “This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue. So, Jesus went with them.

He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: “Lord, don’t trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one go and he goes; and that one come and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this’ and he does it. When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, ‘I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.’ Then, the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

SERMON

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Today's scripture is not so much about healing as it is about faith.

Not just any faith, but faith in a special person. We frequently picture faith as being part of someone who is steeped in religious tradition, someone who is knowledgeable of scripture and has tested the dialog between themselves and God, someone who speaks from experience. But, today, we hear of someone who has never met Jesus, and yet, has faith that Jesus calls exemplary in all of Israel.

I wonder how that made his disciples feel when he said that.

If I read this right, they were standing right there with him and I'm sure they heard him. If you want a definition of faith, think back to Hebrews 11. It speaks of being certain of things we hope for and convinced of what we cannot see. Look at the title of that book – "Hebrews." Not just anyone, but "Hebrews." This centurion was anything BUT a Hebrew. He was part of the Roman Army, but not necessarily Roman. A true Roman probably would not have asked for Jesus' help.

Historians tell us of many from other lands within the empire and who were conscripted into the Roman Army, but were not from Rome. We don't know where the centurion was from. But he represented Rome and Rome was the enemy of the Jews and yet, this man sent elders from the synagogue to ask for Jesus' help. He obviously did his job well because his rank implies he had authority over many. In fact, he even tells Jesus that he does. But it appears that the elders delivered his message because they had a certain loyalty toward this soldier. He was obviously a special person to them. He was instrumental in building their synagogue and we can safely assume he was permissive in regards to their Jewish practices. So, he was a good man, perhaps a complex man.

Can you imagine how it must have felt for a man of such authority to ask for help?

The use here of the word 'authority' reminds me of a quote from General Blackjack Pershing during WWI. He said these words, "In any structured society where one man is subordinated to another, the officer, if he is a gentleman, need never speak of it. And the subordinate, if he is a gentleman, need never be reminded."

That kind of authority was the type that this centurion wielded. Powerful. He made things happen. When he said jump, everyone asked "How high?" And yet, this Roman soldier's power, his manhood, and his authority were not so fragile that they could be damaged by saying, "Jesus, help me." The fact that he assumed Jesus could heal without coming to his house was a sign of the depth of his faith. To him, Jesus' power and authority made sense. It was the way things were supposed to happen.

Something that stands out to me in this story is that the Jewish elders said, "This man deserves to have you do this." Later we hear the centurion say of himself that he is unworthy of Jesus favor. If we focus on the fact that God's grace is a gift, then this thought process of deserving and unworthiness stands out as a blatant misunderstanding among the people back then.

Do we make the same mistake? As we have faith in what we cannot see, we should add we have faith in what we do not deserve.

I'm sure we have all heard someone giving an explanation of something and they preface it by saying, "Now, in a perfect world,...." That is usually meant to indicate that what was to follow was a hypothetical explanation, something that made perfect sense, but would never happen exactly that way.

Part of the good news of the gospel is that God knows what that perfect world looks like; more than you could ever imagine. As our own Pastor Frank says, "Grace is part of the fabric of creation." To me, it's a world where everything makes sense; a place where things like grace, love, forgiveness, charity, compassion, sacrifice, healing – all make sense.

We can envision that world. We can envision the things like it says in Hebrews; things of which we are convinced but cannot see; the things we hope for and are certain of. It doesn't make sense that children should suffer, that people starve, that thieves come in the night; but these things do happen. We don't live in that perfect world, not yet. So many things of this world don't make sense. It makes faith a hard thing to have. But God's grace gives us the power to have faith. In this messy, rotten, stinking world with its ups and downs, grace always comes first. When you believe what you cannot see, give your thanks to God, because He is why you are able to do that. To put it simply, faith is trust.

But believing in what we cannot see is not without a firm basis. Scientists cannot see the insides of an atom, the electrons, neutrons, protons and the like. But they have evidence that points them toward the truth. And when that truth is applied in real life situations and you see the outcome you expected, you feel secure in proceeding with your beliefs.

You have faith in that light bulb to illuminate the room, but a light bulb cannot save you.

What about faith in God? Do you have evidence we can see? Are we not surrounded by a cloud of witnesses? Can we trust what gospel tells us? That answer is up to you.

One of the top ten reason for NOT being a Christian is because it's too hard. Yes, it's hard. Jesus told us to take up our cross and follow him. Is there something about the word 'Cross' that we do not understand? We have spiritual tools from God. Paul tells us of them in his letter to the Ephesians. He speaks of the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of spirit.

When you look at all the scriptures having to do with faith, you can easily conclude that for Christians, faith is an absolute necessity. And yet, it is different for each of us because we are all not wired the same. Faith does not come from a cookie-cutter God that sees us as endless photocopies of each other.

Presbyterians are big on tradition. But, faith is not doctrine and tradition, we have civic clubs for that. It is not simply believing in God, even the demons believe in God. It is not merely intellectual, even highly intelligent pagans can envision something that parallels God.

It is not just hope. I can hope it doesn't rain on my fishing day, but I cannot be sure. Make no doubt, hope is a prerequisite for faith. It is a positive, unwavering expectation of good. It keeps us in a place where we can believe, but hope is not faith in itself.

Faith is not just believing what you see. When you hear someone say, "Seeing is believing," you don't need faith to believe what you see.

Faith is the same as inner peace. Faith is not "Trying to believe." One who is trying to believe is on the right path, but has not yet arrived at what we would call faith.

Your faith is based on what you know. There will be those in the world who say your faith is just a matter of 'Brain-washing.' Such people do not know the first thing about brain-washing. Former POWs, especially those from the Korean conflict, will tell us that it is a process of completely tearing a person down and restructuring his/her thoughts. Your identity is assaulted, your guilt is channeled to a low point, then released to give you a feeling of dependence on your captors. Then there is a point of confession and rebirth. There's no grace of any kind, anywhere along the way.

Why is it that talking about faith sometimes brings out the shyness in us? Is it doubt? Is it fear of judgment from others? We should not fear saying what we believe because of what others may think.

The centurion certainly did not. Did he consider the possibility that word may get to Rome about his trust in and relationship with this Jewish Preacher? I'm sure he thought of that. That did not seem to stop him.

Christians who live only for 'safe' bets are not exercising their faith; it's not growing.

Do you trust your faith? Do you venture into the unknown sometimes because you were called and you trust God?

It can be frightening to let go of the grip you have on things of this world and trust that God is with you.

The fear is normal.

You are only human. But your faith says, "Go, do it."

Know that you can approach the throne of God with confidence and venture out to the task with God beside you.

Be the centurion.

Amen