

Luke 7:1-17

When we left off last week, Jesus had chosen Twelve Apostles to send out to spread the Good News of God's salvation. A few weeks back, we heard Jesus first announce this Good News in his hometown, using the words of Isaiah. It would be good news to the poor and release to the prisoners and oppressed.

Between last week's reading and this week's, Jesus has been spelling out for his followers what it means to live in and live out that Good News. This teach-in is usually called *The Sermon on the Plain*. And in this sermon, Jesus said things like:

Happy are you who are poor, because God's kingdom is yours. Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you. Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate. Don't judge, and you won't be judged. Don't condemn, and you won't be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you.

Jesus has begun to gather and train not just his apostles, but a community built on the Good News of God's salvation. This week we find Jesus back in Capernaum - a coastal city by the Sea of Galilee, the base of operation for Jesus' ministry in Galilee, after he left his hometown of Nazareth. Before arriving in his hometown, where he upset the hometown folk who tried to throw him off a cliff, Jesus predicted they would tell him: *Do here in your hometown what we've heard you did in Capernaum*. But he reminded them of how God brought a Syrian general

to the prophet Elisha to be cleansed of leprosy; and how God had sent Elijah to a widow in another land.

Today, we see Jesus retracing the footsteps of Elijah and Elisha. He is bringing the Good News of God's salvation to unlikely folks, just as he had told his neighbours in Nazareth. Jesus told the folks back home in Nazareth: *There were many persons with skin diseases in Israel during the time of the prophet Elisha, but none of them were cleansed.* Instead, Naaman the Syrian - not an Israelite - was cleansed. Like Rome in Jesus' day, the Syrians were enemies of Israel, an invading army, occupying the land, oppressing the people. The story of Naaman the leper's healing is a story about God sending his salvation across enemy lines, across ethnic and religious lines.

So it shouldn't surprise us that Luke seems to have patterned the story of Jesus healing the Roman centurion's servant after Elisha healing the Syrian general, Naaman. What are the similarities between the two stories?

Naaman was a Syrian general. So he was an officer of a nation that had invaded and was occupying Israel. Today's story begins with a Roman centurion - an officer of the enemy nation that was occupying Israel.

We are also told that Naaman was a great man and highly regarded. Our Roman centurion was also highly regarded, even by the local Jewish population, though he was a Gentile representing the nation who is oppressing them.

Naaman was a great and highly regarded warrior, but he had a disease he couldn't defeat: leprosy. It would surely kill him. The centurion's favourite servant also had a disease that was killing him.

A Jewish servant girl interceded for healing on Naaman's behalf: *"I wish that my master could come before the prophet who lives in Samaria. He would cure him of his skin disease."* So Naaman told his king about the Jewish prophet, Elisha, and the king sent a letter to the king of Israel, which led to Elisha agreeing to heal the Syrian officer. Today, we have some Jewish elders earnestly pleading with Jesus to heal the centurion's servant. "He deserves to have you do this for him," they said. "He loves our people and he built our synagogue for us." So in both cases, Jewish people - the servant girl and the Jewish elders - intercede for healing on behalf of an enemy military officer.

Naaman didn't meet Elisha before being healed, nor did our centurion meet Jesus. In Naaman's case, Elisha sent his servant out to meet Naaman before he got to the prophet's house. In today's story, the centurion sent his friends to the Jewish prophet Jesus before Jesus got to his house. The centurion was willing to reach out to the rabbi on behalf of his servant. He cares enough about this person to seek Jesus' help. The centurion has heard about and knows the power of the teacher and healer. He also respects Jesus enough to send another delegation to tell Jesus that he does not have to come to the house. Jesus, a rabbi, would be rendered unclean if he were to go into the home of a Gentile.

The message he had them pass on to Jesus was: *I don't deserve to have you come under my roof. In fact, I didn't even consider myself worthy to come to you. Just say the word and my servant will be healed.*

The Jewish elders insist the centurion deserves to have Jesus do this for him, because he loves the Jewish people and built them a synagogue. But the centurion insists that he doesn't deserve a visit from Jesus. He understands that Jesus healing his servant isn't based on what he's done for the Jewish people. It all comes down to Jesus' mercy meeting his need. Luke says Jesus was impressed with the centurion. He turned to the crowd following him and said, *"I tell you, even in Israel I haven't found faith like this."*

This Roman officer gets the Good News of God's salvation, even though he's never heard Jesus preach and may only have a basic grasp of the Jewish scriptures. But the Jewish elders don't get it. Only because the centurion loves them do they decide to ask Jesus to heal his favourite servant. But Jesus has just told his followers: If you love those who love you, why should you be commended? Even sinners love those who love them.

The Jewish elders think the centurion deserves Jesus' attention because he built them a synagogue. But Jesus has just finished teaching his followers to do good, expecting nothing in return. The centurion was the one in this story who loved those considered enemies. He gave them a synagogue, and doesn't seem to have asked for anything in return. He was already following Jesus and didn't even know

it!

Naaman's healing took place at a distance. He was healed when he dipped seven times in the Jordan River, at the Jewish prophet Elisha's word. The centurion's servant was also healed from a distance, at the word of the Jewish prophet Jesus.

Just like Elisha healing the Syrian general Naaman, Jesus healing the Roman centurion's servant is a story about God's salvation reaching across enemy lines, cultural lines, and religious lines. Near the beginning of Luke's Gospel, John the Baptist's father Zechariah sang of how God has brought salvation **from** our enemies. But Jesus did something better: he brought salvation **to** their enemies. Something that gets lost in translation is the word "heal." The centurion wanted Jesus to come and *heal* his servant. But the word for healing is also the word for salvation. Luke uses the same word in Acts when Paul was on a ship full of prisoners that ran aground. Luke says the centurion in charge of the ship wanted to save Paul - the same word Luke used for Jesus healing the centurion's servant. Jesus was doing more than just loving his enemies when he healed the servant. He was bringing the Good News of God's salvation right into the enemy's house!

This story is also important because it foreshadows Acts, when the Apostle Peter brings the Good News of God's salvation to the house of another Roman centurion, Cornelius. As Cornelius and his household are baptized and added to the church, God begins in earnest to tear down the divisions between Jews and

Gentiles. Peter acknowledges this by saying: *I really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another.* The story of Jesus healing the centurion's servant would also be treasured by the Gentiles who came to Christ after Cornelius, because, just like the centurion, they never met Jesus in the flesh. But they could know that, through their faith and Christ's faithfulness, salvation had come to their house. Just like it had for that centurion.

Upon leaving Capernaum, Jesus heads to a new town – Nain, a village not far from his hometown of Nazareth. Luke also wants us to know Jesus' following is growing: *His disciples and a great crowd travelled with him.*

Back in Nazareth, Jesus had said this to his neighbours: *"There were many widows in Israel during Elijah's time, when it didn't rain for three and a half years and there was a great food shortage in the land. Yet Elijah was sent to none of them but only to a widow in the city of Zarephath in the region of Sidon."* - a story we heard back in the fall. We have watched Jesus walking in the way of Elijah - reaching across enemy lines with the Good News of God's salvation. Now it's time for Jesus to walk in the way of Elijah, too.

We've seen how Luke told the story of Jesus healing the Roman centurion's servant as a sort of re-telling of Elisha healing the Syrian general Naaman. Now, Luke wants us to hear echoes of God sending the prophet Elijah to the widow. Elijah arrives at the town gate of Zarephath. Jesus is approaching the city gate of Nain. Elijah's widow was the matriarch of the household, and she had only one son. As

Jesus came into the city, a dead man was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow. The widow's only son got sick and died. Elijah brought the boy back to life, and Elijah gave him to his mother. Jesus also brought the widow's son back to life, and gave him to his mother. Everyone who saw it made the connection between what Jesus did, and what Elijah had done so long ago. They said: A great prophet has appeared among us. They recognized Jesus as a prophet like Elijah.

They also sensed Jesus was something more than Elijah, because they also said: *God has come to help his people*. They could see God at work in what Jesus was doing. Even in how he tells the story, Luke wants us to see that Jesus is greater than Elijah, Elisha, or any of the prophets. Because it's in this story that Luke calls Jesus "*Lord*" for the first time. Angels called Jesus *Lord* the night he was born. Simon Peter called Jesus *Lord* when Jesus brought him the miraculous catch of fish, but now Luke - as the author of the Gospel - calls Jesus "Lord" for the first time. Luke says that "*when Jesus saw this weeping widow, the **Lord** had compassion for her*".

In Jesus' compassion for this widow, we see right into the heart of God. In the Old Testament, there was no quicker way to get on the fighting side of God than to mistreat a widow or an orphan. Listen to Exodus: "*You must not exploit a widow or an orphan. If you exploit them in any way and they cry out to me, then I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will blaze against you, and I will kill you with the sword. Then your wives will be widows and your children fatherless.*"

Widows and orphans represented the most vulnerable people in ancient Near Eastern cultures. This widow - like the one God sent Elijah to - was doubly vulnerable, because not only had her husband died, but so had her only son - her sole source of support and security, her only protection in the world. Luke makes sure that we know Jesus saw her. He had compassion for her. He spoke to her. He gave her son back to her. Raising her son was at least as much about her as it was about the son. Because by giving her son back to her alive, he was also giving her own life back - her support and security in the world.

The people recognized this as God coming to help his people, because Jesus' compassion for this widow faithfully reflected God's fierce protectiveness toward all widows.

Luke says: the Lord had compassion for her and said, "Don't cry." Not because Jesus forbids us to mourn for those who have died. He himself wept in John's Gospel, beside his friend Lazarus' grave. But in The Sermon on the Plain he'd just preached, Jesus said: Happy are you who weep now, because you will laugh. That's what the Good News of God's salvation does. He was telling the widow she didn't have to cry anymore, because he was about to fulfill this beatitude, and turn her mourning into dancing. And he did this by giving her son back to her.

Martin Luther had this to say about this story: *It has pleased God to be a God of those who are not full and satisfied but are rather poor and thin, those who suffer hunger, thirst and distress, who are imprisoned and who die. This gospel belongs*

to those who discover how affectionately he takes care of this widow. Each person should accept this example as doctrine, and think hard about it, so that he learns it well.

Jesus had begun his ministry by announcing that the Good News of God's salvation is for the poor. It's a word of release for the slaves and prisoners. It's a light for those sitting in darkness. Jesus told his neighbours this Good News would go to those most in need of it ... just like when God sent healing across enemy lines to the Syrian leper, Naaman, through the prophet Elisha ... just like he sent the prophet Elijah to that widow and her son. So we see Jesus walking in the ways of those old prophets, bringing the Good News of God's salvation to the households of a Galilean widow and a Roman centurion.

When the people saw Jesus at work, they said: *God has come to help his people.* And just maybe, if we follow Jesus, bringing the Good News of God's salvation to the dark and desperate corners of our time, even across enemy lines, across religious lines, across ethnic lines, across colour lines, across lines of injustice - people will also see our work, and conclude that God has come to help them, through his people.

Amen.