

Faith Like the Centurion's

Jesus told his disciples one time that if they have faith and do not doubt, whatever they ask for in prayer they will receive. Do you believe that? Whatever we ask for in prayer, as long as it's in faith, we will receive? If you did believe it, what would you ask for? A million dollars? A beautiful, sprawling, split-level house? In the country? With lots of trees? Overlooking a lake? A huge back yard? Your own boat? And an outdoor fireplace? C'mon, dream big; Jesus told us to!

Or maybe you would ask for long life. Good health. Successful careers. Well-behaved, happy children. Same goes for the grandchildren.

Is this how God operates? Like a genie who grants our every wish? It says so in the Bible! "Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive!" If only, right?

The centurion in today's story had heard about Jesus, including his ability to perform miracles. So when he heard that Jesus was nearby, in fact in his same village of Capernaum, the centurion was eager to speak to him. He had a miracle he wanted to ask for.

Let's recall who or what a centurion was. A centurion was an officer in the Roman Imperial Army of the first century. Specifically, he was a commander of 100 soldiers; hence the name "centurion."

Needless to say, he had a lot of power and influence. In his own words, all he had to do was say "go," and one of his underlings would go, or "do this" and they would do whatever he commanded. Imagine having that kind of power over 100 trained soldiers! With that kind of power you could get a lot accomplished.

Our text gives us an even closer look at this centurion. We learn that he had good relationships with the Jews in Capernaum. They were supposed to be enemies, but our story makes it clear they were on friendly terms. "He loves our people," the Jewish elders said of him. And apparently the feelings were mutual. He had even built a synagogue for the people—or rather, had it built, probably by commanding his 100 men to do so.

Not only was he beloved by the Jewish people of Capernaum, and presumably by his own soldiers; he was beloved by the slaves who served him. And by one in particular. We don't know what kind of relationship this slave and the centurion had. The writer said the centurion valued his slave highly. Which could mean that he valued his work. But it sounds like the two had become friends—maybe even closer than friends. Perhaps the slave had become a confidant for the centurion, an advisor, a companion—someone whom the centurion could confide in, ask for his counsel, share personally with.

But now, his trusted, beloved servant and friend was ill. Seriously ill. And the centurion was frantic with worry. What if he dies? The possibility was almost unbearable. And that is where our story begins.

Imagine the centurion at his slave's bedside, perhaps holding his hand. Imagine another one of his slaves or soldiers comes in and says, "Sir, the man they call Jesus of Nazareth is here! In Capernaum! Perhaps he can do something." And the centurion says, "Yes. Maybe if the Jewish elders go to him ask on my behalf, he will come." So that is what the centurion does. The elders set out to find Jesus.

But while Jesus is on his way, the centurion changes his mind, and says, astonishingly, to his friends, “Wait a minute. I am not worthy for Jesus to come here. Besides, it would violate his purity laws. Quickly, run, ask him not to come, but merely to say the word, that my slave may be healed.”

I always think the centurion comes across as presumptuous and dismissive. But that’s not what Jesus saw. He saw both an honest humility and a strong faith.

Is it possible to be, at the same time, both powerful and humble? A quick scan of our current presidential candidates would say a tragic “no.” Is there no room for humility amongst our nation’s leadership? Would it have been that horrible for President Obama to actually apologize to the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Is it that unthinkable for Donald Trump to respond to a reporter’s question by saying, “I’m sorry. That’s a very good question, and I’m afraid I don’t have the answer?”

It’s interesting, isn’t it, how humility is the least desirable quality for a person to have, rather than the most desirable. And yet, is it not humility that makes truly great women and men great? Think Jesus. Mother Theresa. Martin Luther King. Mahatma Gandhi.

Jesus recognized the greatness in the centurion. And behind that greatness, he recognized the humility. He understood that those two qualities are really two sides of the same cloth.

Just as doubt and faith are two sides of the same cloth. There is no indication in our story that the centurion had any doubt whatsoever that Jesus could heal his servant with nothing but a word.

But I know all about doubt. You’ve heard of “Doubting Thomas?” That’s me. My rational mind tells me that healing doesn’t just happen with a word from Jesus. Healing requires doctors, and diagnoses, and drugs. Lots of drugs. And sometimes, surgery.

And yet I can’t help but wonder. What role does faith play in healing? Whenever one of you goes into the hospital, Lois and I have the habit of coming to your hospital room to visit you. And during that visit we almost always say a prayer with you. We ask God to surround you with his peace. We ask God to grant you relief from pain and worry. And we ask God for healing.

What is it that allows me to ask God for healing, even amidst my doubt? Is that not also humility? The willingness to accept that I might not know everything? That there might be a reality beyond what I can see, or grasp? That Jesus Christ is not just an amazing character in the Bible, but is alive and real today?

One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Mark 9:24. A man’s son had what we would call a mental illness, but what the Bible calls an evil spirit. The man says to Jesus, “If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.” Jesus replies, “If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.” And in the next verse, Mark 9:24, the man cries out, “I believe; help my unbelief!”

Belief and doubt, or faith and doubt, are two sides of the same cloth. And it is precisely humility that allows us to believe, to have faith. To put it differently, humility enables faith.

That still doesn’t mean that we will always get what we ask for from God. God wants us to ask. But God alone knows what we truly need.

Jesus saw what was in the centurion’s heart. And maybe it’s not a stretch to say that faith such as his will always be rewarded.

I believe; help my unbelief!