

“Two Stories of Healing”  
Luke 7:1-17  
February 7, 2021  
Rev. Michael Poulos  
First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine  
*use by permission only*

We are continuing our journey through Luke’s gospel, moving one chapter forward into chapter 7. If you remember from last week, chapter 6 contains the major section where Jesus is laying out instructions for his disciples. Though it’s just part of one chapter, it’s the longest lesson plan we have from Jesus. Remember Jesus doesn’t go around preaching about himself but he preaches about God’s kingdom, God’s rule that he is bringing to the world now. It’s good news for the poor, release to the captives and those who live on the margins. God’s rule is about the upside down world where the poor and hungry, the weeping and the persecuted are blessed, and the rich and comfortable are sent away empty. This is a radical message, and Jesus calls his disciples to demonstrate radical love - we are to love even our enemies (6.27), showing mercy to others as God has shown mercy to us. We are to give to those in need, not asking for anything in return (6.30). We are not to be in the judging business but in the forging one (6.37). And for Jesus the emphasis is always on doing the faith, on putting it into practice (6.46). We might call him “Lord, Lord” but if we don’t put his teachings into action, our lives will be without a solid foundation. So when we finish these lessons in chapter 6 and turn to chapter 7, we should not be surprised that Jesus himself is actually practicing what he preaches - we see him putting his words into action through two healing stories. In these two stories Jesus is showing us through his actions who he really is. Yes, he’s a prophet but he is much greater than the prophets of old.

So let’s focus on these two stories of healing: one takes place in the Galilean town of Capernaum - the other in a nearby town called Nain. In the first story, a centurion’s servant is healed. In the other a widow’s son is brought back to life. The first story clearly highlights the faith of the centurion, a man of great authority who cares for his slave. The centurion is a Gentile, a leader in the Roman guard who oversees 100 men. The widow is a Galilean, a Jewish woman who has lost her only son. While her only son is the one who is healed, she is the one at the center of the story - when Jesus sees her coming through town with the funeral procession, he has compassion on her.

Now Jesus has been healing people from the beginning of his ministry. In fact, in chapter 4 when Jesus was in Capernaum he healed a man with an unclean spirit (4.31-37) as well as Simon’s mother-in-law who had a fever (4.38-39). People sick with various kinds of diseases were flocking to him for healing (4.40), and so it is no surprise that the centurion knew about Jesus’ ability to heal. What is remarkable in this little story is that it’s the first instance Jesus heals remotely. The centurion sends at first the Jewish leaders to advocate for Jesus to come heal his slave, and when Jesus starts to come to his house another delegation of friends stops him. The friends relay to Jesus the message from the centurion: “Lord, don’t be bothered. I don’t deserve to have you come under my roof. Just speak the word and my servant will be healed” Notice this man’s humility - though he was a powerful man who had lots of authority from Rome, and though the Jewish leaders made the case that he really is worthy of Jesus’ attention, the centurion

clearly says “No, I’m not worthy.... Just say the word and my servant will be healed.” Jesus marvels at the centurion's faith! “Not even in Israel have I found such faith!” While we are told in the next verse that the slave returns to good health, the climax clearly is the centurion’s faith.

This Gentile becomes the unlikely role model for faithfulness. In this way Luke is reminding us that God’s love and mercy cannot be restricted by any attempt on our part to define who’s an insider and who is an outsider. In many ways God’s love is a boundary-breaking love, in this case crossing the religious and ethnic boundary between Jewish and Gentile. Remember, the thing that nearly got Jesus thrown off the cliff in Nazareth was his sermon illustration to his hometown congregation that in the days of Elija and Elisha, God used the great prophets to bring miracles to unlikely people, specifically to foreigners like Naaman the Syrian who was healed of leprosy (4.27) and the widow of Zarephath (4.26) who is brought relief during a famine. The boundary-breaking love of God is the kind of love that calls us to love even our enemies, to do good to those who may hate us (4.27). One Bible scholar has noted that if love is to be extended even to our enemies, then we should not expect Jesus’ gracious ministry to stay within any kind of safe perimeter (*Joel Green, The Gospel of Luke: The New International Commentary of the New Testament, p. 283*). The fact that Jesus, a Jew, is willing to visit the Roman centurion and his home is amazing - such a visit would render Jesus unclean according to the Jewish purity codes. Throughout Luke’s gospel Jesus continues to show us his boundary breaking love time and time again. And great examples of faith are lifted up in unlikely places, like in the story of the Good Samaritan as well as the story of this faithful centurion.

In this day of social distancing and isolation, it is good to remember that God is able to heal remotely - a touch or an embrace may be preferred but this story reminds us that God’s power to bring healing is not tied to face-to-face interaction. I know many of us are using the phone more and more to check in with each other, and this type of community building is essential in this pandemic time. I have seen how in some of our Zoom classes love and support and yes, even healing, is offered. Another lesson this story gives us is the reminder that even when we are not even able to pray for ourselves we may be healed through the petition of others. No where do we read that the servant has faith or even is aware of Jesus’ presence - it is the faithful petitions of this Roman commander that makes all the difference. I think we, too, need to be reminded of the power of prayers we offer for others, as well as gratitude for the prayers others offer on our behalf.

As we begin to take a closer look now at the second story, the healing of the widow’s son, it's important that we are aware of its direct connection to the story of the widow and Elijah found in 1 Kings 17. As Jesus pointed out in his inaugural sermon to his hometown congregation in chapter 4, in the time of a famine Elijah was sent to bring relief to a widow, a foreigner from the town of Zarephath. And not only did the great prophet Elijah perform a miracle by providing bread for her (1 Kings 17.8-16) but he also brought her son back to life (1 Kings 17.17-24). This parallel story is key to understanding what happens in our story recorded in Luke. Soon after the healing of the centurion’s servant Jesus and a crowd following him goes to the town of Nain in Galilee. At the gate of the town he sees another large crowd, a funeral procession of a dead man being carried out to a burial site. We are told that the man was the only son of a widow, and the focus of the story begins to zoom in on her. We read that when the Lord **sees her**, he has compassion **for her** and he says **to her**, “Do not weep” (7.13). Not restrained by the purity codes saying he should not touch anything near a dead body, Jesus reaches out and touches the wooden

stretcher carrying the corpse. And with the healing authority of his words Jesus simply says, "Young man, I say to you rise!" (7.14) He does rise, begins to speak and Jesus gives him back to his mother. The crowds are awestruck and begin praising God! "A great prophet has arisen among us!" And when we put this story next to the story of Elijah and the healing he did in 1 Kings 17, we see that Jesus is not only a prophet like Elijah but he is much greater than Elijah! If you have time later today to read 1 Kings 17, it's a fascinating story - to save the widow's son Elijah carries him to the upper room and lays him on his bed - he then stretches himself over the boy three times, crying out, "Lord my God, please give this boy's life back to him!" The boy is healed, and just like Jesus does, he gives the boy back to his mother.

But Elijah had to do a lot of praying and laying over the boy - someone in our Bible study on Wednesday night remarked how this sounded like some early form of CPR! But Jesus has much greater power - all he has to do is speak with the authority of God and her son is healed. In this way Jesus is acting out what he has already preached about - God's kingdom has arrived and this means good news for those who are poor, those who are weeping - to them the kingdom belongs! Jesus is clearly much greater than the prophets of old because in and through him we see clearly the power of God at work. That's why the crowd breaks out singing the doxology - they know that God has looked favorably on them!

We don't know how the widow lost her son, but we know such a loss is probably the most painful thing anyone can experience. We all will experience over a lifetime death and grief, and losing a parent or grandparent or even a pet is never easy. But nothing can compare to the loss of a child. It is often called the ultimate tragedy, and parents who have to cope with losing a child have to do some of the hardest work one will ever have to do ([HealGrief.org](http://HealGrief.org)). In the midst of this grief Jesus comes with compassion and healing and yes, the power to bring life from death. When we witness senseless tragedies there is little that we can say or do for those suffering. We can be with people, bringing comfort mostly with our presence. Being present with others is important because what our faith tells us is that we are never alone - we belong to a God who is full of love and compassion, a God who understands our pain and our deepest despair. As we move through the gospel of Luke we will see that Jesus, too, is headed for death, and that his mother Mary will also lose her son, God's only Son. But death will not have the last word. Jesus, too, will be raised to new life like the widow's son was.

In the sermon I preached my first Sunday with you back in September I tried to give you the best summary of the gospel that I know, that "In life and in death we belong to God." These opening words from the Presbyterian "[Brief Statement of Faith](#)" can be grounds for hope. We belong to a God who loves us and can understand any pain and sorrow we experience, because this God knows first hand the pain of losing a child, too.

We are living in a time when many people are experiencing loss and grief. If this pandemic has taught us anything, certainly it is a reminder that all of us are vulnerable, and that wealth and status do not mean anything when it comes to the transmission of the virus. We are all vulnerable. I love how Luke puts these two healing stories together - as often is his style, he pairs together stories featuring a man and then a woman together. In today's passage we see a man who has high status, a Roman centurion who has helped build the synagogue in Capernaum so definitely a man with connections. And then we see a widow who has lost her only son - in a patriarchal society she is vulnerable since she may have no one to care for her. Sickness and

death come to us all, and though some may have privilege and connections like the Roman centurion has, these things really don't make a difference, do they? We all depend on the love and mercy of God to heal us, and ultimately our hope rests not in attempts to secure things in this life but it rests in the One who is our Creator, our Healer and yes our Friend. To this One be all honor and glory, now and always, Amen.