



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“Where Faith is Found”

Luke 7:1-10

Will Sparks May 29th 2016

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I want to start today by talking a little about this lovely array of candles that gets lit, one by one every time we gather. I remember the first time we did this, four or five years ago. We were struggling in the worship committee with a way of gathering up the prayerful concerns and longings that we all carry with us as we come to church. So we came up with candle lighting, each candle being a hopeful expression of a need or longing within one of us here. And from the very first time we did it, the community got it, and it has become this amazing expression every week of a prayerful community gathered in hope and trust, for healing and life.

So although I don't know this for sure, I am guessing that one of these candles expresses the longing that Linda Tylor will find healing, will find a kidney that will save her life. I am guessing that one of these candles is in loving memory of Sam Zavaglia, and is shedding loving light on his family and his friends, I know that throughout my mother's battle with cancer, many candles burned for her healing and when she died, candles have burned for my family and my dad. Today on the weekend of the walk for a cure for Cystic Fibrosis, I am pretty sure a candle burns for Gillian, Jaqueline and Walt's granddaughter, hoping someday soon there will be a cure. This is a table shining with trust and hope and vulnerability, for when it comes down to it, our lives are a crazy mingling of powerful grit and determination, and utter mysterious blessing and what can feel like random fortune or misfortune. How one person can struggle right from the beginning while another person can dodge misfortune and illness for decades is a mystery to me.

And so today as we read the compelling healing story of the centurion's slave, I want to start out by saying that we are up against a theological conundrum in the area of healing. I have heard people say, "God was really looking out for me," when they make it through a vulnerable moment in life. "Somebody was watching over me." And I get that. We are more acutely aware, after a serious health crisis, that our lives are not really in our own hands. But what happens when we don't make it, or things don't go well. Does that mean God abandoned us, or just had a bad shift? What are we doing when we pray for healing, and what kind of expectations are we placing on God? What are we saying about how we believe life works?

These are deep questions, and I have no illusion that I will untangle them in the short time we have here today. However, what we pray and how we pray is reveals what we believe about life and God. If you want to know what someone really believes, look at their pocket book, and look at what they pray.

The people who came to Jesus figured Jesus had this mystery of prayer and healing sorted out. The local Roman centurion wanted Jesus the healer to come and heal one of his key staff people. And the Jewish establishment knew this guy well. He had been good to them. Built the town hall. Surely if anyone deserved the spiritual goods that Jesus offered, this guy did. So the people frame the question of healing and prayer in terms of whether you have earned it. Whether you deserve it. But even before they get to the centurions place, word is brought to Jesus. This commander, used to making things happen with a word, used to getting things done, is powerless in the realm of healing, knows it, and see himself as un-worthy of Jesus' house call. He frames the question in terms of worthiness. Is he worth the trouble?

But the thing that really catches Jesus' attention is his humble trust. "I am over my head, but I believe that you are not. Help me." And that acknowledgement and trust moves Jesus.

So as we puzzle through this mysterious realm of prayer and healing, it is a relief to know that for Jesus it is not about deserving it or being worthy of it. That would not be good news. But here we see that familiar place where there is a gap in power between what we feel able to cope with and what is needed- this guy and everyone around him are over their heads, and in this and so many other stories it would appear that humble faith matters. There is no room in these situations for arrogance, or demanding. Kneeling is the posture. A flickering candle says it all.

The question of healing is particularly challenging for 21st century western people who live in a society used to making it on our own cleverness. Modern medicine has pushed the mystery and the vulnerability to the margins. People used to be at a loss to know what to do much sooner in the disease process than we are now. Whereas people used to pray pretty much at first snuffle or cough, we wash our hands more regularly, and reach for the antibiotics. So we often only pray when we come across a gap in our own ability to command the universe and it obeys. We are the centurion, but when the universe stops obeying, then we confront mystery and turn to God in prayer.

And I understand that. It makes no sense to ignore good hygiene and wonder why God would let the infection happen. We do know things about health and healing. But God is not confined only to the places where our knowledge runs out. God does not conform to and stay within a box created by our willingness to acknowledge the mystery behind it all- the things we think we have figured out and the things that remain beyond us. God is the God of all of it. But we tend to acknowledge God only as a last resort, when our own cleverness runs dry. We are like the immature teen, wanting independence, to "do it ourselves"- "Go Away!" And God, like the wise parent, knows more than we think, is more present than we know, has good parental connection with everything, has eyes in the back of her head, is more present than we know, is ever close but incognito, watchful, patient, loving. God will be God, as the United Church Song of Faith puts it "Holy Mystery, beyond complete knowledge, above perfect description. Yet, in love, ... (she) seeks relationship." God will be God, unconfined by us, mystery behind and beneath it all.

And so our prayers, our candles, are really humble expressions of our hope, our longing. And that is the place where the mystery of God meets us and bears down on the places in life where that longing is genuine, and our trust is open. These two things, longing and trust, seem to be the common elements present not only in the healing stories of Jesus, but in life when we find ourselves where the centurion found himself: longing for healing; in humble trust in the face of the mystery of life.

I don't have it all figured out. I don't know why sometimes things take a turn for the better and at other times they take a turn for the worse. But in this season after Pentecost, our imaginations are stirred by Spirit, blowing like the wind, kindled like a fire, moving and whispering into the midst of the mystery messages of hope, of courage, of love and peace. Perhaps the prayers, the candles are our humble and vulnerable attempts to whisper back. Perhaps that is where faith is found. Amen