

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"The Lord sees us"

Scripture: Luke 7:1-17, Psalm 146

Hymns: Take my life and let it be 637, Hallelujah! Sing to Jesus 370, Lord of the Dance 250, Praise: My life is in your Lord, communion hymn, All who hunger, gather gladly 534, And can it be that I should gain 352

February 5, 2017

Communion Sunday

Rev. Steve Filyk

Do you ever wonder whether God notices you?

Most of us are familiar with that song, 'Jesus loves me'.

"Jesus loves me this I know,  
 For the Bible tells me so.  
 Little ones to him belong,  
 They are weak but he is strong."

Most of us know this song.

Most of us have sung those lyrics.

And while I think most will agree

That Jesus does care for those around us.

I think that sometimes we question

Whether he really notices us.

Does God actually see US, listen to US, pay attention to US?

This past week I attended the ministerial prayer meeting.

At that meeting was a pastor

Who had just returned from a mission trip

Up near the Arctic Circle.

When I arrived he was telling a story  
About answered prayer:  
A successful moose hunt.

Not many of us have ever prayed for moose.  
But we don't live in the far north.  
Nor depend on hunting for our food.

All the same I think we all can imagine  
That a freezer full of moose meat  
can make a big difference  
In the lives of those who are poor...

So this pastor was talking about an answered prayer.

But what made this story interesting  
Was the boldness and specificity of the request.

They asked for a dry-cow  
That was accessible from the road,  
before they had to be at a church event,  
during a season where few hunters  
were having any success at all.

They prayed this bold, specific prayer a number of times.  
Not long later they spotted one moose  
But the shot was too long  
And it was too far from the road.

And so they pressed on  
Even though there was little likelihood  
Of finding another.

And then suddenly they saw  
What looked like a truck on the horizon.  
As they closed in they realised it wasn't a truck  
It was their dry-cow.

It was close to the road,  
They had a good shot,  
And they successfully dropped it.

It was so big that it had to be cut  
Into nine pieces  
for the men to carry away.

The pastor understood this to be an act of God's provision.  
God was clearly looking out for them.

Well do you know what I was thinking?  
Hey pastor, could YOU pray for ME?  
You see there's something I've been praying about for weeks  
And I'm not sure that God has noticed.

Seems like he's listening to YOU!

Ever felt that Jesus has his favorites?  
That while he seems to be listening to some,  
He's not returning your calls?

We don't always understand God's sovereign will.  
Why God says 'yes' or 'no' or 'not now'.

Some prayers seem effective:

They were told he was a lost cause  
When they took him into emergency.  
But two weeks later he is better than ever,  
All smiles.

Some prayers seem effective,

While others seem impotent.  
Despite extraordinary measures  
Despite all the praying  
Her health just continues to decline.

We don't always understand God's sovereign will.

We tend to think it has something to do with the pray-er:  
God just notices some people while ignoring others.

Or we think it has to do with the prayer:

Somehow getting the right words.

The first of today's Gospel stories  
could encourage this sort of thinking.

I mean when you think about that Centurion  
Asking for his slave to be healed...

Well he's just seems so deserving...

First of all he's important.

A Centurion was a Roman officer with great responsibility.  
 He had oversight over as many as a hundred men,  
 And received pay commensurate to his responsibilities.

But he's not just powerful, he is also respected.

While he is a Gentile, an outsider,  
 He has befriended the Jewish people,  
 even built their synagogue.

When he is in need, his Jewish friends lobby Jesus  
 Saying that the Centurion is a 'worthy' man.

But more than just being powerful or respected  
 The Centurion is a man who has great trust in Jesus.  
 When Jesus heads for the Centurion's home,  
 The Centurion messages Jesus 'not to bother'  
 saying it would be sufficient for Jesus  
 to 'just say the word'.

Usually it's the people who are amazed by Jesus  
 But here Jesus is amazed by the Centurion.  
 "Not even in Israel have I found such faith." Jesus says.

As anticipated the Centurion's slave is healed.  
 Looks like he deserved it.

The story of the Centurion helps us realise  
 That there is often great faith  
 Outside of our tight religious circles.

The story of the Centurion helps us see  
That Jesus wants to cross these boundaries.

But the story of the Centurion doesn't go far  
In inspiring our prayer life.

I don't know about you but this Centurion  
Makes me feel small, inadequate:  
I have neither his faith, nor his respect, nor his power.

Well if you are like me,  
You will be happy that today's reading  
Includes another story.

Another story that might challenge those fears  
That God isn't interested in us.

In the second story Jesus' entourage  
Comes across a funeral procession.  
It's a particularly sad procession:  
a young man is dead.

Amid the crowd of mourners  
Jesus notices the young man's mom,  
A widow.

Unlike the Centurion of the previous story,  
this person is vulnerable.  
She has already lost her husband,  
And is now burying her only son.

“In the patriarchal culture of the first-century Roman Empire,  
 widows were dependent on their sons,  
 brothers, or other male relatives for sustenance.”<sup>ii</sup>

But with her son dead,  
 There is no man in the house.

Added to that we hear nothing about her being highly regarded.  
 Added to that there is no mention of her faith.  
 Other than what is obvious:  
 She doesn't even ask Jesus for help.

She's not even trying to get attention.  
 She's weighed down by all the grief.  
 She has no hope.

But what happens,  
 What happens in this story?

Well we are told that Jesus notices her.  
 And that when he sees her  
 He has compassion for her.

One commentator notes  
 How “the Greek word usually translated “compassion,”  
 splanchnizomai, comes from splanchna,  
 which means “intestines”...  
 [speaking of a] deep, gut-wrenching compassion...”<sup>iii</sup>

Jesus notices the widow  
 And feels the pain of her suffering.

And then he does two things  
That no-one would expect.  
First he touches the bier,  
The frame on which the corpse was laying.

["Touching the corpse or the bier,  
or even the bearers themselves would make you  
[religiously] unclean." <sup>iv</sup>]

Secondly, even more astonishingly  
Jesus tells the young man to get up.

PAUSE

No-one there would have dreamed of this.  
He was dead—any possibility for healing had long-passed.

And so they are shocked, dumbfounded  
When the young man stirs and arises.

Jesus presents the once dead,  
Now alive man to him mom,  
And the freaked-out crowd starts shouting:  
"God has looked favorably on his people!"

God has looked favorably on his people.  
God notices us.



Now please don't start thinking  
That today's lesson is that we should all expect great miracles.  
Often God's presence is revealed in smaller,  
Less discernable ways:

Acts of kindness.  
Words of encouragement.  
Tender mercies and small graces.

But it IS clear from the story that  
God notices the least of us  
God notices us and has compassion for us.  
God does not watch us from the sidelines  
But intervenes.

We hear this in today's Gospel lesson.  
And we see this in the Lord's Table.

God didn't ignore a world that was broken and confused.  
No, God sent us his only Son.

God didn't send Jesus  
To a small minority that deserved him.  
Remember what the good Centurion says to Jesus:

"Lord, do not trouble yourself,  
for I am NOT worthy..."

God didn't send us Jesus  
Because any of us deserved it.

God sent Jesus because God's character is compassion and mercy.  
God cares about our needs.

And so even the least of us,  
Those with little faith  
Or respect or power  
Can look to God with faith and boldness.

For ultimately it is not the pray-er or the prayer  
That motivates God's kindness.  
It's God's love.

Amen.

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i See "Centurion" *Wikipedia*

ii Michal Beth Dinkler Commentary on Luke 7:1-17 [www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3002](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3002)

iii Michal Beth Dinkler Commentary on Luke 7:1-17 [www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3002](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3002)

iv N.T. Wright *Luke for Everyone* 83