

Sermon for Sunday, June 6, 2010

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JESUS HEALS

Matthew 8:5-13

In Israel last week we were walking where Jesus, the apostles, Abraham, David, Elijah walked. This was my third time, but the experience was fresh. I want to share a bit of it by considering a miracle of Jesus in a place we visited.

Jesus in Galilee

Jesus was born in Bethlehem and he grew up in Nazareth, but he chose the city of Capernaum as the center of his ministry activity. We might think he would choose Jerusalem, so he could be in the greatest city of Israel and the center of its religious life. Perhaps he could teach faithful Jews in the streets or the temple precincts. But no, Jesus chose Capernaum as "his own city" (9:1). Why? It was a fairly large city. But more important it was on the Via Maris. One of the great roads of the ancient Middle East, the Via Maris or Great Trunk Road, offered the best way to travel from Egypt to great cities - Damascus, Ninevah and Babylon.

Capernaum was near the center of Galilee. The visitor can see why Jesus called the north the "Galilee of the Gentiles." When we survey the land, most ruins are in the Roman and Greek style: hippodromes for horse races, theatres for deadly games, bath houses, shops, libraries. Amphitheatres, carved into the hill side, easily carry sound past 5,000 spectators to the last row. Greek idols stand near inscriptions to Caesar, the divine, son of the divine Caesar.

In Capernaum the visitor also sees the ruins of a synagogue, built by a patron whom we will mention later. The principal ruins, from the third or fourth century are quite grand. They rest on older stones dated to the first century. Those stones are the foundation for the synagogue where Jesus worshiped. A few miles away, he delivered the Sermon on the Mount.

At least three apostles came from Capernaum: Peter, Andrew, and Matthew. Matthew collected road tolls from travelers (9:9). Our centurion was there to guard that road. Jesus performed many miracles in Capernaum; the gospels describe four: Peter's mother-in-law, the paralytic on the roof, the official's son (Mark 1:29, 2:1, John 4:46). Word of the miracles spread up and down the road as people passed through Capernaum. They attracted a man in need - a centurion who pleaded with Jesus for help.

Feel the surprise. Jesus is a Jewish teacher and healer living in a land occupied and oppressed by Rome. The centurion enforces Roman rule. Why would he ask Jesus for help? Why would Jesus respond? To say it another way, imagine that God granted someone power to heal five or ten people who were sick. A devout Christian might spare a great religious leader. Family members would be quick to help each other. We might cure a friend stricken with cancer or restore someone who had great talent, the capacity to serve humanity, or an inventor.

Jesus healed far more than ten people. Yet at first glance, it seems that he chose randomly when he restored. First, he heals a leper, a social outcast. Far from the main stream of society, lepers had no constituency. Next Jesus helps a centurion, a commander of the Roman troops that occupied and defiled Israel. Why help him? Why did Jesus bestow his favor at random on people who don't seem to deserve it?

Perhaps the word "deserve" sets off an alarm. By definition, grace goes to the undeserving. The very question, "Who deserves a miracle?" gets things backward. It focuses on a man rather than Jesus and his gracious kingdom.

The setting (Matthew 8:5)

Since Capernaum was a large town on a major road, it was logical for the Romans to have a toll booth there and to have a garrison of imperial troops led by a centurion. A centurion commanded the basic fighting unit of the Roman army. The most talented soldiers became centurions. They were the backbone of the army. They maintained discipline, gave orders, and led the occupation of Israel, as did Nazi captains in France in World War II. How could Jesus help such a man?

The centurion's need of healing (8:6)

The centurion approaches Jesus and pleads, "Lord, my servant lies ill, paralyzed and suffering terribly." "Lord" or "Sir" is a term of respect and a great surprise coming from a centurion to a Jew. He comes to ask Jesus to heal his servant, but the Lord has already healed him and he is on the way to knowing who Jesus is – not even the disciples fully grasp that yet, but he is on the right path.

We do not know what disease afflicted the centurion's servant, but we understand the emotion. Centurions were working officers. They were paid well, but could not legally marry during their twenty years of military service. Centurions might take a concubine, but not a wife and family. They did not fraternize with regular soldiers whom they had to discipline. But they were not nobility, so they were not accepted by higher officers. A centurion was a man alone. Luke says the sick man was a slave (*doulos*), but Matthew uses a term of affection, *pais* - child or beloved servant, not the common term for a slave. This servant might be his closest "family" and he grieves.

Jesus offer to heal (8:7)

Jesus' reply is ambiguous in the original. The literal words are, "I myself going heal him (future tense). It may mean "I shall go and heal him" or "Shall I go and heal him?" Either translation is perfectly possible - the original Greek manuscripts have no periods or question marks.

It makes sense for Jesus to ask, "Shall I go?" for two reasons. First, if we look carefully, we see that the centurion never actually asked Jesus to heal his servant. He reported the problem, but stopped short of a proper request. He never said, "Please come, heal my servant." Why not?

He hesitated for a cultural reason. A Gentile's house is unclean for a Jew. He knows that if Jesus came to him, he would suffer harsh criticism. Jesus is willing to go for the sake of the sick. Is that what the centurion wants? But there's more:

We often stop short of asking for help, either from a friend or from God, because we fear rejection. It is safer, emotionally, to describe our problem and wait to see if an offer of aid comes without asking for it. Even when we pray, we can ask and not ask: "Lord, please, but I understand if you don't." Thus we ask and do not ask. So Jesus draws out the centurion. He must declare his request and hope.

Let me ask: If you are sick, do *you* want to be healed? If you suffer from anger or resentment toward someone who has wronged you, do you want to free from anger or bitterness? If you struggle with a chronic sin, do you want Jesus to heal your will? You cannot expect to progress unless you say "Yes."

This question is important; Jesus raised it more than once. John 5 records an event at the pool of Bethesda. People thought the pool had healing powers so the sick gathered there. One man had been there for thirty-eight years when Jesus saw him. Jesus asked him "Do you want to be healed?" He never really answered the question. Perhaps he felt safer being sick. Jesus did heal his body, but his soul remained sick.

Some people would rather talk about their troubles than resolve them. They find their identity in their pain, their struggle. It is far better to find our identity in Christ, as a beloved child of God, not as a wounded child of the world.

The centurion understands Jesus' offer. He is willing to violate Jewish traditions, a ritually unclean home (Acts 10:27-29). Jesus touched a leper for his first miracle, so we know Jesus didn't let tradition bind him. Did the centurion know that? At any rate, he realized Jesus made a generous, risky offer.

The centurion knows Jesus' power to heal (Matthew 8:8-9)

The centurion replies, "I am not worthy to have you come under my roof" (8:8, English Standard Version (ESV)). Since he knew Jewish customs, the centurion may have hoped to spare Jesus trouble. But "I am not worthy" also signifies a deeper humility. He knows Jesus owes him nothing. He knows Jesus is a man of God and a healer. He is asking for a blessing that he knows he does not deserve.

The centurion continues, "Only say the word" – literally, speak with a word – "and my servant will be healed" (8:8b). A word will be enough for him because he understands how authority works. If Jesus speaks by a word, his servant will be healed, for Jesus' word has instrumental power, even at a distance. He says, "For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one 'Go,' and he goes; and that one 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant 'Do this,' and he does it" (8:9).

The centurion is telling Jesus what he knows: "I am a master; you are a master. I command and soldiers obey. You command and creation obeys." We don't know exactly what the centurion grasped, but he clearly understands that Jesus has such power that his mere word can accomplish great things.

The centurion had meditated on what he heard about Jesus in light of the Roman system. That system held that each command came down in an unbroken chain that began with the emperor himself. When he commanded, it was as if the emperor himself had spoken.

The centurion realized Jesus had a similar position. When he spoke, God spoke. As a centurion had the emperor's authority, so Jesus had God's authority. The centurion realized Jesus might heal with a touch, but that he did not heal by a touch. The power did not lie in Jesus' hand, though many people thought it did. The power did not reside in Jesus' garments. Many folk thought it might be so. They wanted to touch Jesus' garments (9:21, 14:36). For their sake, Jesus often touched people before he healed them. But the centurion knew better.

We need to grasp the extent of Jesus' authority, of who he is. His power extends wherever his will ordains it. He is omnipotent and since he is also omnipresent, he projects his power wherever he wishes. These are the distinctive attributes of God. We must see that Jesus is very God and bow to him.

Meditating on God's character in light of our experience

The centurion had meditated on his life experience and put it to good use. His experience with authority taught him about God's authority. We, too, can meditate on our life experience and learn from it, each in our calling. How so?

Scientists who have an eye for it can see God's design in creation. We have a terrible oil spill in the Gulf Coast and no one knows what to do. But there is a protobacterium called geobacter that may be part of the cleanup. It has the ability to consume underground petroleum spills and oil-based pollutants with carbon dioxide as its sole byproduct. Geobacter is God's creation. A believing

scientist sees the capacity God gives creation to purify itself. In this oil spill, the self-purifying traits of creation may be the main cure. Praise God for his creation!

A mother who cares for little children has a unique opportunity to learn about God's unconditional love. As Shakespeare said, infants enter the world "mewling and puking." The parents get to clean it up. An infant is more prone to cry than to laugh. Babies are a bottomless pit of need - and they don't write thank you notes! Yet we love them fiercely and gladly sacrifice for them. At point after point, the love of a mother or a father illustrates God's sacrificial love for us.

Parents hand food to their children, who feel free to shut their mouths, turn their heads away, smear it in their hair and toss it on the floor. Similarly, God the Father gives us His sun and rain, and we complain that it is too hot, then too cold, too rainy, then too dry. He gives us His grace and we feel free to reject it. Yet God loves, more patiently and deeply than a parent.

Let me ask you something: Will you strive to use your vocation to meditate on God's goodness and power? A businessman might admire the way Jesus started the church and trained disciples to carry on his work. A teacher appreciates the skill of Jesus and the apostles as they persuaded people to trust God.

Historians strive to enter earlier worlds with sympathy and understanding. Therefore, they see how sympathetically God entered our history. A chef or nutritionist can see how God's earth offers us all we need to be healthy, if we make right use of the good foods He has given us.

Jesus marvels at faith and mourns at unbelief (8:10-13)

Matthew says Jesus "marveled" at the centurion's faith and said, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith" (8:10, ESV). We may wonder how Jesus could marvel. Could anything surprise him? In his deity, Jesus had already seen the remarkable faith of Abraham, David and Isaiah. During his incarnation, Jesus had seen strong faith before. Yet Jesus knew how to marvel at wonderful things. God has granted my wife a sweet, strong voice. I've heard her sing many times, yet I still marvel at its beauty. A wonderful thing remains wonderful even if we experience it a thousand times. Let us marvel at good things. Strong faith, Jesus says, is a marvelous thing.

The centurion's faith is wonderful because it is a token of salvation for the Gentiles. God will redeem people from all nations. Jesus says, "many will come from east and west and will take their places at the feast with Abraham... in the kingdom of heaven" (8:11). He means God will have eternal fellowship with them. They will be redeemed and enjoy God forever.

The prophets predicted that Gentiles would come to God. God chose Abraham to bless the nations: "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3). Isaiah foretold a feast for all people. God will remove the shroud that covered the nations, the darkness that covered the earth. "The Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples... the best of meats and the finest of wines.... He will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever... In that day they will say, 'Surely this is our God; we trusted in him and he saved us... let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation'" (Isaiah 25:6-9, 43:5, 56:3-8; Psalm 107:3.)

The church must also reach the nations. We care first for "insiders" – our own people, covenant children. But we must also care for outsiders, like the centurion, whom we meet in the street. Some will come to us, as he did, but we must go to others. Most of them are secular. The church cannot be content to welcome Christians who move from other cities or shift from church to church. We reach toward and welcome all kinds of people because God brings all kinds of people to Himself.

When Jesus says he has never seen such faith in Israel, he praises the centurion, but hints that something is amiss in Israel. No one in Israel could match his faith. Jesus is almost unbearably blunt: The nations will come to him, but "the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (8:12, ESV). Many in Israel will face judgment, for they will not come to Jesus.

They will suffer what Matthew literally calls **the** weeping and **the** gnashing of teeth. Everyone weeps or gnashes his teeth in anger on occasion. Some homes have designated weepers who handle most crying on behalf of the family. But those who never know Christ's covenant love will face **the** weeping and gnashing – the great weeping, the weeping of the lost.¹ Jesus will wipe every tear from our eyes if we let him. If not, there is a weeping that will not end.

Yet that particular day ended on a happier note. After Jesus blessed the centurion for his faith, he granted what he requested. Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would. And his servant was healed at that very hour" (8:13). As the centurion said, Jesus healed by a word.

Healing for the nations: seeing people as men and women in need?

Our passage features a centurion who has great faith in the lordship of Christ. In Matthew's account, Jesus chooses to answer the plea of a centurion who seems to come to him at random. He is simply a centurion, an agent of Rome (Roman in the sense that he served in Rome's army. But centurions were not necessarily Roman by ancestry or residence).

Luke 7:1-10 recounts the same event, but tells us things that Matthew does not mention. The centurion had Jewish friends who interceded with Jesus on his behalf. They said Jesus should hear the centurion's petition because he was worthy. He loved the nation and built their synagogue. We *saw* the ruins of the ancient synagogue that this very man built. Anyone can visit the place.

But Matthew chooses not to reveal this. In Matthew, the centurion is just a man in need, a soldier in need of grace. He comes to Jesus not with his works, but with his need. He comes to Jesus bringing nothing but his need.

Matthew reminds us that God gives His grace freely, to whomever He wills, sometimes for the last person we expect. But the centurion has great faith in the power of God shown in Christ. No one that day had such faith and understanding. By faith, he trusted Jesus and pleaded for mercy. Jesus granted that mercy. The centurion had to wonder if Jesus would help him. But he turned to Jesus, bringing nothing but his need, pleading for nothing but mercy, and Jesus heard him. He trusted in the power and the goodness of God. That is our hope to this day.

John Newton's conversion illustrates the point. Newton grew up in a Christian home but entered the British Navy as a young man and dove into a life of sin. This happens more than we care to admit. But God doesn't abandon covenant children.

Newton's life went downhill. Eventually he deserted in Africa where he thought he would have opportunity to satisfy his lusts. He became a small-time player in the slave trade, but he was abused, even held in chains by greater men. Physically ruined, he escaped and became a ship's mate on a British merchant vessel. Put in charge of the ship's rum supply, he became so drunk that when the captain discovered him, he hit Newton on the head. He fell overboard and the crew had to rescue him. But more troubles awaited.

Near the end of his voyage, a great storm overwhelmed his ship. Blown off course, the ship took on ever more water. Working at the pumps for long, frightened hours in the hold of the ship,

¹ Turner, *New Testament Greek Syntax*, page 173.

Newton feared death. In those desperate hours, Newton remembered the Bible lessons his mother taught him as a child. The word took hold of his heart. Convicted of his sin, Newton repented and cast himself on the mercy of Jesus Christ. He made it home safely. He became a pastor. When he wrote "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me" it was no pious exaggeration. Newton was a wretch, but God's grace is greater than our wretchedness.²

Newton was the last person anyone expected to find healing in Christ. But Newton did find faith and healing. Let's apply this to ourselves individually and corporately. First, all who believe receive salvation. If you come to faith in Jesus, he makes you his beloved son or daughter, forever. If you repent, he restores.

Second, if you trust in the power of Christ you can expect substantial healing in this life. Jesus healed the centurion's servant of his disease. He heals to this day. Newton always bore some scars from his rebellious life, but Jesus granted him substantial emotional, moral, and spiritual healing. He will do the same for us.

Third, notice that the encounter with the centurion did not occur in the synagogue, but on a city street. The Lord met Newton on a boat. The church cannot wait for people to enter its doors. We need to meet people where they are - one by one, at work, at play, and in our neighborhoods, and tell them of the Lord, for Jesus still brings healing to the people of all nations.

Most personally, do you trust in the person of Jesus? Do you trust in his goodness and grace for the undeserving? Do you believe he has the power to bring substantial healing? I pray that we, like the centurion, recognize who Jesus is, trust his word, his authority and show saving, healing faith in him. I pray that we can answer the question "Do you want to be healed?"

² Phillips, *Hebrews*, 2006, pages 139-40.