

May 30, 2021

Texts: Psalm 96: 1-9; Luke 7: 1-10

Title: "An Army Officer Who Cared"

There's a silly story going around about a country church one Sunday morning, where the preacher gave an invitation to the altar. "Anyone who has a special need that you would like prayer for," he said, "come on up." With that, a young man named Leroy got in line. When it was his turn, the preacher asked, "Leroy, what do you want me to pray about?" He said, "Preacher, I need you to pray for help with my hearing." The preacher put one hand on Leroy's ear, placed his other hand on top of Leroy's head, and then he prayed up quite a prayer and the whole congregation joined in with great enthusiasm. After a few minutes, the preacher removed his hands, stood back and asked, "Leroy, how's your hearing now?" Leroy answered, "I don't know. My hearing ain't 'til Thursday."

Today's story from the gospel of Luke is drawn from Jesus' ministry of healing. It begins with a Roman centurion, an officer in the Roman army, who had a servant who was very dear to him who was critically ill. The centurion was deeply concerned. He heard about Jesus so he sent some respected Jewish leaders who were his friends to plead with him to come heal his servant.

The outcome of this story is that Jesus heals the servant but there's other aspects of the story that speak to us. The Roman centurion was a deeply respected person in the community which is surprising as he was part of the occupying army and wasn't Jewish. But nonetheless shows himself to be compassionate, generous, and humble too. And Jesus commented that "Never among all the Jews in Israel have

I met a man with faith like this.” (Luke highlights the faith of “outsiders.”)

Faith isn’t the special province of one particular people. There are good people, faithful people everywhere. This man was one of the hated Romans yet he was a good man. There are people all over this world and people in your neighborhood who are like that even today. We need to be careful not to write people off on account of a first impression or a superficial thing such as ethnicity or culture. Because there are many we might consider “outsiders” in our world that have much to teach us about love and faithfulness and service to others and we’ll never know it unless we will interact with them and listen to them.

Paul M. Stevens in his book *Gathered Gold* tells about a Japanese magazine that had a picture of a butterfly on one of its pages. The butterfly was printed with special inks that appeared to be a dull gray until it was warmed by the touch of a hand. If you touched it with your hand, the chemicals in the ink would react and the dull gray would be transformed into a rainbow of colors.

That butterfly is a metaphor for the power of love to heal human hearts. That love is lived out each and every day all over this world. Do you know people like that--people with that kind of inclusive concern and compassion that has no limit? Hopefully you and I are those kind of people. There are many people like that still around in our world today and **they’ll tell you that loving people is its own reward.**

Friends, showing love and compassion to another human being can be the most rewarding experience life has to offer. It can almost be a purely selfish

experience--we help because it makes us feel so good. **But Christ tells us that kindness not only is its own reward, but that it's also our major responsibility as his followers.** It's not enough to speak piously about God's love, we are called to transmit that love through concrete acts to specific persons.

A few weeks ago, we read this verse from 1 John, "We know love by this; that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods, sees someone in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action" (3:16-18).

Many of us Christians today, hardened perhaps from watching the news on tv, are critics of the world, critics of the people around us. We see nothing but bad and want nothing to do with it. But Jesus calls us to love the world. And that's the mission he gives to the church. We need to keep that before us, looking for the next opportunity to reach out, to open our hearts to people, to partner with them on behalf of the call of Christ.

Finally, on this Memorial Day weekend we remember those who have given their lives out of love and a desire to serve their country. I saw an article this week entitled "What Is a Veteran." "A 'Veteran,' it says, whether active duty, discharged, retired or reserve--is someone who, at one point in their lives, wrote a blank check made payable to 'The United States of America,' for an amount up to and including their life. As we remember those who've come before us with gratitude, we also remember that Christ also wrote a blank check payable to us. It

was written with his own life. He cared that much. And he calls us to care, not to give up on this world but to reach out in sacrificial love. Amen.