

A Healing Outside the Box

Proper 4, Year C, RCL. Luke 7:1-10. (The healing of the centurion's slave). May 29, 2016; the Second Sunday after Pentecost. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

We standardize the way we interact with God. Our worship and our prayers tend to be formulaic, that is, they tend to follow the same, or at least similar, patterns over time. Partly this is because we want life to be somewhat predictable, so we have an idea of what's coming and how to plan and organize, and partly it's because we want to "get it right". When you're dealing directly with God the possible outcomes are on a different order of magnitude from tying your shoes or washing a car or even launching a spaceship; we don't want to make mistakes where life, death and eternity are concerned. And we want prayer and worship to be meaningful, beautiful, and appropriate—*fitting*, as they used to say. Not just because we're afraid we'll get ourselves and other people in trouble if we mess up when dealing with God, but because something in us simply wants to do a good job when a lot is at stake. And what is at stake is not just our safety and welfare but our own dignity, other people's dignity, and God's dignity. One of the better qualities of human nature is this urge to show respect and appreciation.

So for example in today's Gospel reading Jesus has been asked to heal the slave of a centurion, a fairly high-ranking Roman military officer. The standardized way to proceed would be to go to the bedside and interact with the sick person, usually involving touching him or her and reciting or enacting some reasonably well-recognized healing formula. Healers in Jesus'

time did standardized things like we sometimes see Jesus doing in the gospels: making a paste to put on a blind person's eyes, and such like.

But in this case there was a problem. The Roman centurion admired and supported the Jewish community where he was stationed (believe me, that was not always the case!) and he was aware that from the point of view of the Jewish religious rules and regulations he and his household—the people, the dwelling, the food and implements in it, the whole shebang—were unclean. Normally Jews would not enter such a dwelling and interact with its people, especially if eating and drinking and disease and death were involved. It was, in short, a pagan household, ritually unclean for Jews, even if the centurion himself (and some of the rest of the household) were coming around to belief in God as the Jews understood God.

And boy, was that centurion ever coming around to a sound belief in God! He realized that if God was as the Jewish tradition described him, and—to be fair—as some non-Jewish philosophers understood God, then God was not constrained by location and by customary ritual. God was everywhere and if you called on him, there he was.

So Jesus and his entourage did not have to enter that pagan house—did not have to come under that unworthy roof, as the centurion put it—because if Jesus had the authority to heal in God's name then all he had to do is know about the situation and talk to God about it. The sick person could be on Mars, or in some other galaxy—those people didn't see the cosmos as we

do, but it's the same idea—and Jesus could speak the word and God would act.

Did the centurion know he was dealing with God Incarnate when he was dealing with Jesus? No, I'm pretty sure he thought of Jesus as a very holy man who had the gift of healing, among other good spiritual qualities. Which was true as far as it went. And you can tell by Jesus' response that he thought the centurion had a spectacularly accurate notion of how God and God's friends interact. Jesus said that this professional Roman soldier, the sort of person most Jews would see, with good reason, as dangerous and religiously off-base, had a better understanding of how prayer works than most Jews had. (And, again, to be fair, a better understanding than most *non-Jewish* people had.)

God loves his creation and wants to do good in it through relationships he forms with us human beings, his stewards. We are limited by time, space and matter. God is not, and though he understands that we need the structure and discipline of standardized ways of talking to him and about him, he also wants us to know that he is not limited to our boxes. If love, if honoring what is good, true and beautiful is what we are up to, we can trust God's omnipresence and his omnipotence and ask him to act in ways that stretch what we are used to. Jesus knew this and often violated customary Jewish practice to get God's work done—not all the time, because he was not there just to stir things up but mainly to teach this truth: that God loves every human being and wants us to engage with his power, his free gift of grace, to overcome sin, death and evil.

The centurion's pagan background was no barrier to this. My guess is that Jesus would have gone into that ritually unclean house if he had to (though I suspect they also might have brought the sick person out into a more public space). But the centurion offered Jesus a priceless gift: the gift of faith that has sought and found understanding of the nature and purposes of God. The Savior and the soldier could stand together at a distance in the power of God the Father Almighty. And because they could stand together in the God who acts in love, a sick person, whose problem was pain and weakness and death rather than philosophical theology, was healed.

What's going on, in your life, in our life together in this parish, in other lives you know about, that you don't think God can get at? That you are too ashamed or afraid or angry to open up to the Creator of all universes, who wants nothing more than to be your best friend? He is closer to you than the vibrations of air this sermon is touching your ears with—and he can be even more subtle than that. Yet he made every galaxy that has ever been or ever will be, and he cares about them like he cares about you. What can a God like that do for you, and what can you do for love of him?