

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor  
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## “Stop, Luke, and Listen: A Summer Sermon Series”

### 1. The P-Word

Luke 7:1-10) "After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. 2 A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. 3 When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. 4 When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, 5 for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." 6 And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; 7 therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. 8 For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." 9 When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." 10 When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

I used to work for a man who had, shall we say, his **gruff** moments. And while most of the time he was a considerate man on other occasions he (like all of us sometimes) had his other sort of moments. And at those times, in fact, he would be a good walking definition of the word “gruff” – if you want to know what “gruff” means, you could just point at him.

One day I was sitting in my little office outside of his and all of a sudden his voice boomed from his office, barking out these five words: **“Blaisdell. In my office. NOW.”** Hmmm..... Apparently this was going to be a gruff day. But on that particular day, I was seized by an attack of gall, orchutzpah, or plain ol’ stupidity, because instead of getting up and going in his office, I wait a moment and then spoke back to him and said, *“But sir, I haven’t hear the p-word yet.”* And then I waited several long moments wondering if I should start packing my desk up and go and get my pink slip. But then, finally, in a cold voice that almost dripped icicles, his voice came back, repeating himself with one small difference: *“Blaisdell. In my office. Now. Pleeeeeeeease.”*

This morning I am beginning a summer sermon series on several of the stories to be found in the Gospel of Luke. And I am also doing something I don't often do, which is preach from the lectionary selections. For those of you for whom the term might be unfamiliar, the lectionary is an effort by a number of denominations to divide the Bible into a three-year cycle of readings where each Sunday there are passages from the Psalms, the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Gospels are chosen. I don't often preach from the lectionary selections for reasons that I can go into on another occasion, but when looking at this summer's choices, it seemed to me that the readings from Luke's gospel would be a very good thing to focus on. For over the course of these next ten or twelve weeks, these passages look at some of the most important questions and topics of our faith. Not all of them will be easy or light, for sometimes life is difficult and knowing what to think and do in the face of life's pain and hurt bears thinking well about even when that is not an easy thing. But all of them will be instructive to us, I think, because Luke is the gospel writer who is most explicitly concerned in trying to interpret what Jesus means and what His God is like to non-Jewish folks who had little exposure to the Jewish context within which Jesus lived. And, after all, that is us too, isn't it! So let's spend our summer tagging along with Luke as we learn more about Christ and about the God he proclaimed and taught. This morning's scripture is a good place to start this series, for it deals with one of the most fundamental questions of life and of faith: what is God like? So, let us begin:

The story is about an exchange between a Roman army officer – the centurion – and Jesus. Now, we don't know what this centurion was like in the other moments of his life. We don't know if he was having a particularly bad day. What we do know is that in this story, the centurion too, like my long-ago employer, could be said to define the word

“gruff.” For just like my encounter with my boss, there aren’t any p-words in this story either. There is nothing whatever that’s very gracious or tender or even very civil about what the centurion has to say; there is certainly nothing warm and fuzzy about his words to Jesus: *“I am,”* he says, *“a man who has a commander over me; I know how to take orders. And likewise I have those under me who receive my orders and carry them out without question. If I say jump, they jump.”*

And in our story, the centurion has come to Jesus and the centurion simply **presumes** that **Jesus’** authority must be the very same **kind** of authority that he has: *“You have God over you, Jesus,”* he seems to be saying. *“You take orders but you also have others to carry out your orders. So come to my house and heal my servant.”* Do you get the picture here? In the mind of the centurion this occasion seems to simply be the meeting of two commanders who, while they serve in different armies, share the very same methods. Order it done and it will be done. Peremptory. Gruff indeed. No need for p-words here!

Now, one traditional interpretation of this story takes it as a demonstration that Jesus’ own Jewish people could learn a lot about faith from the supposedly pagan Gentiles. The soldier is lifted up in such interpretations as some sort of model of faith, someone we should strive to be like. But I don’t think so. Because if we do that, we end up sacrificing what we know about God, what we know of God from the gospel, what we know of God from the Psalmist who could write repeatedly of God’s steadfast love. Because notice carefully what the centurion in the story has done here: he has deduced the nature of Jesus’ authority from the nature of Roman military command. He has assumed, therefore, that likewise Jesus’ authority derives from the supreme commander’s authority which as in any army runs on many things but when push comes to shove there is always the implicit reality that if you don’t do what you’re ordered to do unpleasant things will happen to you. In other words, the centurion has made God after his own image; he has

modeled God after his own life.

Now this was not the first time that someone had made the mistake of taking the wrong part of his or her experience to try to understand what God is like, and it won't be the last. In World War I, one American soldier reported his surprise at seeing the belt buckle of a captured German officer with its words "*Gott mit uns*" – "*God is with us.*" The soldier says he was shocked because before then he had simply assumed that God was on his side. Or do any of you recall in the movie Patton the scene that is in fact very similar to the centurion's encounter with Jesus? General Patton calls the chaplain into his office and orders the man to inform God that the American army needs a good rainstorm at such and such a time on such and such a day. None of the chaplain's explanations or questions to the general are to any avail – General Patton will simply not be satisfied until the chaplain has come up with a satisfactory rain prayer letting God know what God needs to do. A few generations ago, a book was written about Jesus and the disciples which claimed that the secret to Jesus' success was that he was a practical businessman who chose twelve good sales associates who knew how to close a deal.

Every one of us, indeed, has at times unintentionally made God into our own image. I know that sometimes I have so wanted God to be vindictive to those whom I was angry with, or wanted God to do something for me at the expense of others. I know that I, like the good general, have sometimes been tempted to use prayer as a way of sending God a memo about what He needs to do instead of as a way to find out what God wants of me. So we can see that the centurion's claim about God, about the kind of authority that Jesus has, is not a new kind of mistake. But Jesus' response to the centurion is very instructive and helps us see a very different picture of God.

So back to the story: How does Jesus reply, then, to the centurion's astounding mistake about who Jesus is and who God is? Well, the most common English translation

goes like this: *“I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.”* In other words, the Jewish people had gotten faith wrong, and the centurion, the pagan, the Gentile, got it right. But I wonder. That just doesn’t square with the portrait of God and the people He chose that is recorded in the Old Testament – which was, remember, Jesus’ Bible! – where the word “steadfast love” is used almost 200 times to talk about God and how God loves His people. Moreover, this “common” interpretation, as we have seen, buys into a model of God that is based, when all is said and done, on threat and coercion.

One of the challenges of reading the Bible is the problem of translation. In the Greek New Testament, in the very earliest manuscripts that we have of the gospels, there are no punctuation marks – no quotation marks, no italics, no underlining. So? Well, the stories of Jesus were first of all oral stories, and **we get no clue from the written text about how the story is supposed to be heard**. In English, we can indicate something of how a word should be heard – whether it’s ironic or sarcastic or whatever – by underlining it or italicizing it. Or if we’re communicating by email or on Facebook, we can write “LOL” to indicate that we’re saying something with a laugh, or we can use smileys or frowney-faces to give a clue as to how what we have written is intended to be heard. But we don’t have those devices when we’re reading the New Testament; we don’t know, therefore, the tone of voice in which a given passage, a given word is supposed to be **heard**. And yet: You and I both know what a crucial difference tone of voice makes. “What’s for dinner tonight?” “Liver.” “Oh, great.” Now if you were **reading** that exchange, years and years after the fact, would you have a clue as to whether this was a liver-lover or a liver-hater? Without the tone of voice, you just can’t be sure.

The point? Well, the Bible too can yield new insights and meaning when we allow our **hearing** to influence our **reading**. Take this passage about the centurion and Jesus: Read the passage aloud, but try changing the tone of voice and the emphasis, mix in a bit of irony and a very different possibility for what the text might mean is suddenly apparent:

“Not even in Israel have I found this sort of *‘faith.’*” Indeed not. For in Israel, Jesus – born and raised in the lineage of Abraham and Sarah, weaned on the teaching of a gracious God of tender mercies who cares for all with steadfast love – would likely not have found such a “faith.” Indeed not. For in Israel at its best, Jesus didn’t find God understood as being just like one more military commander. No, he would have found a God who is described by the prophet Isaiah as enfolding Israel in God’s arms, tenderly holding her up with wings like a mother eagle. A God of goodness and grace. And in Israel, Jesus would have found a faith that was always prodded by the demands for justice, haunted by the claim that all the earth should know what is right and good.

After all, look where Luke places this story in his gospel. It follows what’s called the Sermon on the Plain where Jesus offerings the beatitudes, the blessings, of God for the poor and the hurting. It follows, too, that breathtaking counsel that to be faithful one must love – not order, manipulate, or command – but love to the very point of loving one’s enemies. And then after the centurion’s story comes the tender story of Jesus’ compassion for the widow whose son had died. When you read **that** story, indeed the “p-word” and all its gentle associations comes flooding through! In that story Jesus does not heal because he has the power or authority or the might to do so. He does not manipulate or threaten or coerce. No, in that story Jesus is shown as healing, as the text oh-so-simply puts it, because he was moved with compassion at the sight of her tears.

All of this, then, I believe, offers us a choice, a continuing choice. Which will it be? Which will we respond to? Gruff or gracious God? The compelling and coercive God of a Roman legionnaire or the inviting goodness of a God who weeps with compassion, whose most notable and long-running biblical description is that of “steadfast love”?

We have to choose. In fact, we **do** choose. Every day. In our lives, in the things that we teach one another by the way that we act, in the way we relate to our friends and

family, in the stories we tell, in the jokes we choose to laugh at and pass along, in the ways that we decide to make decisions, in the assumptions we make about other people's behavior. In every one of these ways, whether we know it or not, we make a witness – a witness either to a God who is preemptory, gruff, and coercive, a God who values some people less than others – or to a God who is nurturing, inviting, persuasive, tender, and who is always calling us to be the best we can be. And so, my friends, it is **that** God of tenderness and compassion, the God who calls and lures us all gently toward a world of beauty and grace, it is **that** God that I invite you this morning to rededicate yourselves to following. I invite you – pleeeeeeease.