

***Luke 7:1-10** Now when He concluded all His sayings in the hearing of the people, He entered Capernaum. ² And a certain centurion's servant, who was dear to him, was sick and ready to die. ³ So when he heard about Jesus, he sent elders of the Jews to Him, pleading with Him to come and heal his servant. ⁴ And when they came to Jesus, they begged Him earnestly, saying that the one for whom He should do this was deserving, ⁵ "for he loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue." ⁶ Then Jesus went with them. And when He was already not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to Him, saying to Him, "Lord, do not trouble Yourself, for I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof. ⁷ "Therefore I did not even think myself worthy to come to You. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁸ "For I also am a man placed under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." ⁹ When Jesus heard these things, He marveled at him, and turned around and said to the crowd that followed Him, "I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!" ¹⁰ And those who were sent, returning to the house, found the servant well who had been sick.*

With the passing of Ronald Reagan last week, many news shows have been talking about the world when he was President. One of the main realities of that time that plagued the conscious of many Americans was the so-called "Cold War" we had with the Soviet Union. Movies that were made around that time only made the situation worse. The movies only heightened fears that World War III was right around the corner, and that if it came, the world might not survive it. Many of the movies pictured the President with a phone pressed into his ear agonizing over the decision of whether to launch a nuclear weapon on the opponent. The president stared off into space as the general on the other end of the phone line said, "Say the word, and we will launch it."

The fears created by 9/11 created another similar scenario. After the hijackings, there was such talk about what would happen if another commercial airliner was hijacked and intended to be used as a weapon. The newsmen interviewed pilots who were asked what they would do if given the orders to shoot the plane full of innocent people down in order to save the lives of many others. They maintained that their answer would be the same as that general in the Cold War. "Say the word, and we will shoot it down."

In each of these cases, the scenario is the same, if a person with the authority to do something says the word, that thing is accomplished. The bomb is dropped; the plane is shot down. The one receiving the order simply trusts the word of the one giving the order. He knows that his word is final and powerful.

Today in our Gospel lesson, Jesus has just finished teaching the people many things. And after he finished teaching them, some Jewish elders approach Jesus on behalf of a Gentile centurion. They ask Jesus if He would come and heal the centurion's servant who was very ill. You see in those days, servants were very much thought of like family. And so when one was sick, the family was concerned. The Jews who were around assured Jesus that this centurion was no ordinary Gentile. He was a great man who had built their synagogue. Jesus agreed to go. But as He went, some of the centurion's friends met Him along the way with a message. The centurion said through his friends, "Don't worry about coming all the way to my house. I am not worthy that you would make such a trip. But just say the word, and I know that my servant will be healed."

Jesus couldn't believe it. He had been with the Jews for some time teaching them, and not a one had made such a powerful statement of faith. But now, this Gentile centurion, had spoken words that evidenced great faith. He knew that Jesus could just speak and it would be done. He showed that he understood that if a person with the authority to do something said the word, that thing would be accomplished.

Why was this centurion so wise, so faith-filled? Well first of all, he understood authority, for he was a man with authority. He was commander of 100 soldiers. He told them were to go and they went. And he knew from all that he had heard that this Jesus had authority far beyond his own. He knew that if that authority was exercised, things would happen.

That centurion made his request to Jesus with two very important characteristics, humility and faith. He told Jesus that a man like him, although he had some power, had no worthiness to stand in Jesus' presence. But at the same time, he knew that that Jesus, just speaking a word, could heal his servant back home. "Just say the word, and my servant will be healed," he said.

All too often in our pleas to God, I feel we mess up both of these crucial characteristic. We are quick to pridefully run into Jesus' presence and at the same time less than confident of His answer. We go to prayer with an attitude that Jesus owes us something, but at the same time with doubt that He will give it to us. Today, we can learn much from this Gentile, of all people, about how to present our requests before God.

We, in general, are all too quick in prayer to jump right into our God-to-do list. It is almost at times as if we are just dropping off a work order at God's door. But this is not how prayers should be handled. Anytime

we approach God in prayer we are called to come in humility. We are not to storm His door as if He should take notice of us. Rather, we ought to take notice of Him. Humility comes first as we realize who it is that we are approaching. The fact that we have been encouraged to bring our prayers to Him does not change the fact of who He is as God. He is God almighty, the completely Holy One. He is our Father in heaven, the One whose name is holy, whose kingdom comes, and whose will is done. And that means that before we run into His presence, we ought also to realize who we are. For realizing who we are is the second way in which we learn humility. We must learn as the centurion said that we are not worthy to come to Jesus. For even us Christians, who have been baptized into Christ and have been given His Holy Spirit to destroy sin's grip on us, still allow sin to creep up time and time again in our life. And therefore, when we go to God in prayer, we ought to include a prayer for forgiveness of our sins. This is how our Lord indeed taught us to pray. As we ask for our daily bread, we also admit our unworthiness to receive it. We know that our place at God's throne, with our prayers, was certainly not earned by our lives, but by Christ's life and death. This is the type of humility with which we should approach our Lord.

But just as strongly as we realize our unworthiness to be at God's throne, we also ought to believe just as strongly that God can accomplish all things. We too should approach His throne knowing that if God says a word, our prayers will be answered. God's word created light firm darkness. God's word brought us out of darkness into light through Holy Baptism. God's word bespeaks us righteous each time we hear His words of absolution. And God's Word is that which makes Christ's body and blood present in the Lord's Supper. And if His Word, His speaking, can do these great things, why would we doubt that He can accomplish all of the others things which we ask of him?

No indeed, God encourages us to come before the throne of grace with confidence in his answer. For, James tells us that often we do not have because we ask with doubt in our hearts. God knows that if we doubt His ability to give us the answer to our prayers, we will also doubt that He did answer them when he provides the answer. We too should approach the throne of grace saying, "Say a word, and we shall be healed." We should know that God is more than able and also willing to help us in our times of need.

Our text notes that Jesus was impressed by the centurion's faith. He said that He had not met anyone in all of Israel with faith like this Gentile. He was impressed because he came in humility and yet with great confidence in the One who could answer his request.

Today, we confess to our Jesus that at times we have indeed rushed into His presence with less than humility and that we all often don't pray with the kind of confidence this centurion had. We press our ears in prayer upon this end of the phone and say to Jesus, "Say the Word, and we will be healed." And Jesus without hesitation says into His ear, "I forgive you." He speaks the Word of forgiveness, and we are healed. He forgives us not because we deserve it, but because He can and He wishes to. He wishes to because He loves us and He can because He has suffered the wrath of God for our sins on Calvary.

Today, as each Sunday, we ponder anew God's grace to us in Jesus at the cross. Today, we rejoice knowing that such reflection not only assures us of our forgiveness but also works in us the proper humility and faith with which we ought to approach our God. For seeing Jesus on the cross reminds us of our sin and shows to us our Savior. And with this image on our minds, we are ready to approach our God in prayer as the centurion did. Amen.