

“From East & West”
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When you think of Jesus, what are some descriptors that immediately come to mind for you? Savior? Lord? God with us? Does the name of Jesus make you think of someone who is continually breaking through social, cultural, and economic barriers, crossing into dangerous territory, taking big risks? When you come before Jesus in prayer, do you image him to be the social revolutionary that he was?

In the healing stories of Matthew, we see over and over again that Jesus crosses social boundaries in every way imaginable. First, he touches a hideous-looking leper; now he gives audience to a Roman centurion, someone who is an agent and enforcer of imperial control. Our text today is an extraordinary story on so many levels. In it, we see two vastly different empires: Rome’s and God’s; two distinct ethnicities: Gentile and Jew; and two people with very different social roles: a centurion, and Jesus.

Yet for all of the stark differences, this is also a story that happens on the margins. That is to say, besides its geographical location, the social location of the story does not happen at the center of power, it does not unfold in the place of polite company. Rather, God’s power works especially on the margins—in the places often overlooked by the center, places where there is the least power and influence. There, in those places, God not only loves to dwell, but signs of God’s kingdom, coming on earth as it is in heaven, are most visible. You see, Jesus, as a peasant prophet, was a marginalized figure. And the centurion, because he was a foreigner, was also marginalized. Finally, the slave, who was advocated for by the centurion and healed by Jesus, is easily the most marginalized figure. Dear church, if we want to see God at work, we have to know where to look. This story gives us a major clue as to where to look for the activity of God in our communities.

But while Jesus and the centurion may both occupy the margins of their day, that does not erase the significant social barriers that separate them. The margins are not monolithic. The centurion is a foreigner and a Gentile. But Jesus’ prophetic ministry, and the work of his followers, is for “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 15:24). And then, there is also the unnamed slave, who is not only a Gentile but, as a slave, the ultimate “nobody” in the eyes of ancient Mediterranean society. So both the centurion and the slave are outsiders to the Jewish community. This helps us understand the utter amazement Jesus feels at the words spoken to him by the centurion. Consider this, the centurion is actually speaking the words of the Psalms to Jesus. Listen: Psalm 107:19-20 says this: “Then they cried to the **Lord** in their affliction and from their troubles he saved them; he sent out his **word** and **cured** them, and delivered them from their destruction. Here are the words of the centurion in Matthew 8:8: “**Lord**, I am not worthy for you to come under my roof, but only speak the **word**, and my servant will be **cured**.”

Jesus is amazed at these words. I can't help but wonder if still today Jesus might be amazed when Gentiles like us, use the words of Israel's scriptures to express our own faith in the healing power of God. I would like to think so! I'd also like to think that there is much to learn from this centurion who is so bold and revolutionary enough in himself that he actually turns the prevailing power structure upside down, thus transforming from the one who is to be served to the servant of his slave. In seeking help for a slave, this bold centurion would have been perceived as weak by his comrades. I think it fair to say that he likely suffered social repercussions for his actions.

And so I wonder: might those of us with power and privilege in today's culture be so bold and revolutionary that we would be willing to exchange places with those without the same access to resources and power? Might we seek not to be served but to serve and to boldly petition Jesus for healing, not for ourselves, but for another. In what ways are we approaching Jesus? Do we believe that through Jesus, we can bring healing to our communities?

The radical faith of the centurion truly enacts a vision of the kingdom of God, where people relate and live in equality. Martin Luther said: "Faith is a living, bold trust in God's grace." The centurion demonstrated a living willingness to put himself and the slave in the hands of a loving and graceful God, and he trusted boldly in the power of Jesus to heal and restore.

Jesus' amazement and his response to the centurion shows just how much the centurion's words and actions influenced him. Our English translations obscure the initial hesitation of Jesus to the request of the centurion. In Matthew 8:7, Jesus is giving a resistant, rhetorical question that expresses his own doubt about helping a Gentile, remarking: "Will I come and cure *him*?" As a Jewish man, Jesus was indeed a product of his own ethnicity and culture, which had tremendous ambivalence about Gentiles. Jesus initially understands his commission to work only in Israel. But after having heard the amazing faith and humble submission to Jesus' power and authority, Jesus makes a solemn reply that he has never found such faith in all of Israel.

Christian history and biblical interpretation are sadly replete with terrible instances of anti-Semitism, and so we have to consciously work not to misunderstand what Jesus is saying here. He is not speaking against his own people as much as he is highlighting that faith, not ethnicity, status, birth, wealth, or gender is what constitutes the identity of his disciples.

Finally, because of this bold yet humble centurion, Jesus expands his vision out to the future eschatological banquet in God's kingdom. God's kingdom repairs the broken-down community and cultural barriers that create the haves and the have nots, creating a world in which all have access to adequate resources, and all can take their place in God's family. In God's kin-dom, people will be gathered from east and west. There will be joy, fellowship, and bounty as *all* people come together to enjoy one another and feast at the table of God. What a powerful vision for us to keep in the forefront of our minds. What a beautiful picture to transform the ministry of our church.

Jesus has the power to re-vision the family of God in which false boundaries are overcome. We cannot be personally healed until we see an interconnected community as part of the process of healing. Jesus brings healing to everyone, and part of that healing includes the growth of community beyond the boundaries and barriers that currently separate us from one another's lives. If God gathers us all, then God longs for us to be together and for us to all be safe and whole. And God gives us agency to help bring this vision to fruition.

In what ways is our church living out this vision? In what ways might we work specifically to bring people together, especially people who would otherwise remain separated from each other? How are we, through the power of Jesus Christ, bringing healing and wholeness to our communities? The truth we proclaim when we acknowledge that God created each of us in the image of God is that our bodies are connected to other bodies. God gathers us. God calls us to be gatherers. May we long to be a community of recovery. Let us never forget that none of us are free until all of us are free. Come, Holy Spirit. Amen.