

Faith Conversation
Luke 7:1-10
Unexpected Faith
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This is a story about surprises. I want you to listen and see how many surprises you hear in this story. One man who really surprised Jesus and his followers was a Roman soldier, called a centurion, who commanded foot soldiers. There was little friendship between Roman soldiers and the people of Jesus' homeland. Romans were foreigners, and the Jewish people had learned not to trust foreigners. Especially Romans. They were the enemy. Faraway Rome had sent its conquering armies, and then chosen Roman governors to rule the people.

But this Roman soldier was special. We don't know his name. But his neighbors in the fishing village of Capernaum knew him well. Unlike many of his countrymen, he cared about them and their community, and their ways. He built them a synagogue. A place for them to gather for worship and study. That was a huge surprise. Perhaps his friendship was especially important to them because it was so unexpected. And because he used his resources to help them with something so important to them.

This Roman had a slave he valued very much, who became ill and was close to death. Hearing stories about the local rabbi, Jesus, who was preaching to crowds of people, and healing the sick. The Roman commander asked some Jewish elders he knew to go to Jesus and ask him to help this slave. Here was the second surprise. Why would he turn to the Jewish God, or to Israel's prophets and rabbis? The Romans had plenty of gods of their own. And their own stories about miracles and healings.

The Jewish elders knew Jesus would be surprised, too, so they pleaded with the Teacher, "this man loves our people, and built our synagogue. You should do this for him!" Jesus listened, and started out to go to the centurion's house to see the servant.

Then the centurion surprised Jesus again. He sent friends out to meet Jesus and tell him not to come. Because he was not Jewish, he did not believe he was good enough to have Jesus come into his home. But he did really want help for the slave he loved. The message he sent with his friends was this. He was a commander who was used to giving orders, and having them obeyed. For him, all that was necessary was for Jesus to say the word, to issue the order that his slave

be healed, and it would be enough. And it was. When the friends returned, they found the slave in good health.

Jesus thought about all these surprises, that a Roman soldier would turn to him for help, that his neighbors trusted this man as a friend, who built the synagogue in Capernaum, and that his faith was so strong he believed that simply commanding that the servant be healed was enough. Most people wanted Jesus to touch their sick, to raise them up, to pray for them. This foreigner, who had no reason to trust Jesus at all, trusted him more than anyone. That's why we still tell his story. God wants us to learn to trust Jesus like that.

Do you know how we learn to do that? Learning how to pray where we start. That is not as simple as just asking for what we want. It means learning what the Bible teaches us about what God wants. For us. For our friends. For the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the prisoners, the sick, the dying. And it means learning to ask for those things. Many years ago there was a prayer in a Presbyterian *Worshipbook* that began the Prayers of the People. It went like this:

“Father, whose son Jesus Christ taught us to pray: let our prayers for others be the kind you want, and not just ways of getting what we want, who already have so much in Jesus Christ our Savior.”

That prayer always stayed with me. It taught me something important. Maybe it will help you, too. I will use it today at the beginning of our Prayers of the People.