

"Say the Word"

Luke 17:1-10

May 29, 2016

2nd Sunday After Pentecost

As we celebrate Memorial Day this weekend, we pause to remember all those members of the United States Armed Forces who paid the ultimate price for our freedom by giving up their lives in military action. Why and how did they do this? I don't think many of them intended to die or wanted to die. Many died for faithfully and obediently responding to an order given by a commanding officer. A clear chain of command is a necessity in the armed forces, especially during combat. When, in the heat of the battle, a command is given, this is not a time for responses such as, "Why?" or "I disagree" or "No, I don't think so." The soldier must immediately and completely obey the command for the military objective to be achieved. The story is told of the old drill sergeant who explained it to his men this way, "When I tell you to jump, you say, 'How high?' – on the way up." The commanding officer must have full confidence, as must fellow troops, that a soldier will do something simply because he has been commanded to do so. This helps us to understand the soldier in our text as well as the nature of faith.

The soldier is a centurion – a commanding officer of one hundred Roman soldiers – in the city of Capernaum. He had a servant – a slave really – who was very sick and at the point of death. He had heard of Jesus and believed that Jesus could help his slave. So he sent the elders of the Jewish people to ask Jesus for His help.

The elders praised the centurion highly before Jesus. They said to Jesus, "He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue." He must have had lots of money and lots of love to build such a magnificent building. The remains of that synagogue are still there more than 2,000 years later. I saw the ruins of that very building when I was in Israel. The Jewish people thought that this man deserved Jesus' help in this matter and that Jesus should go right to the centurion's house and heal the slave.

The centurion had a different perspective on himself and on how this matter should be resolved. When Jesus got close to his house, the centurion sent friends to tell Jesus, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. Therefore, I do not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed.

Contrary to the Jewish leaders who thought he was worthy of Jesus attention and deserved Jesus' help, this man recognized his sinfulness and unworthiness, knowing that a good Jew like Jesus would become ceremonially unclean if He entered the house of a Roman. But more importantly, the man knew that it was not necessary for Jesus to come directly to him, show him His power in a spectacular way, and do something special to heal the slave.

He knew that because He was a military man. He knew what authority was and how it worked. He said, "For I too 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 servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." The centurion knew that the authority of his word was enough to make things happen. He believed that, on a much bigger scale, Jesus' word alone had the power to do even greater things. And he trusted fully in that word.

Like the centurion, we face many serious problems for ourselves and others – health problems, financial problems, relational problems, and, most importantly, spiritual problems. But, unlike the centurion, we may think we are worthy and deserving of God's help with these situations.

Some people think God should just do whatever people want Him to do. People who have never shown any interest in God (unbelievers and even self-professed, yet inactive, Christians) expect God's help whenever they need it.

Other people, who are active Christians and recognize their sin, know they don't deserve God's blessings because their behavior has not been perfect. Nevertheless, they believe that God is obligated to help them simply because they have faith. How often have you expected God to help because you have believed so hard and so faithfully?

In addition to expecting God's help *when* we want it, we may also expect God's help *how* we want it. We want Him to come to us directly and with a show of power. We want to see some spectacular miracle to meet our need or to prove His love for us. Many Pentecostal churches lure people in with promises of immediate and direct miracles. Some television ministries have as their theme, "Expect a Miracle Today" and promise spectacular things to happen to all who support them.

The truth of the matter is that we, like the centurion, are unworthy to have Jesus come to us. Our sin has separated us from God. We deserve no blessing and no help from him, but only death and damnation for our. We have no right to expect a miracle, much less make any demands about how, why, and where it should be done. We are entirely at the mercy of God.

And that's not a bad thing, but a very good thing. For God is a loving God who shows mercy and grants help to those who do not deserve it. The Roman centurion had no claim on Jesus' help. He was a Gentile and not part of God's chosen people. Yet God showed mercy to this centurion by not only granting him faith in the true God, but also faith in Jesus as Lord and Messiah who could help him in every need. The centurion may not have been a Jew but he was most definitely a Christian and a believer in the true God.

God has shown mercy to sinners such as us, as well. He sent His Son, Jesus, to die on the cross and take away our sins. The barrier between God and us has come down. God has granted us faith to believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior so that our sins are forgiven by His death on the cross and our relationship with God – a new life with Him – has been given to us by Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Therefore, we are free to live a life of faith which trusts in God to help in every need, but in His way, in His time and by His Word.

Notice how the centurion did that. He didn't have to have Jesus come to him directly. He didn't have to see Jesus perform a miracle. Jesus' word was strong enough to do whatever it promised. As a commanding officer, the centurion knew his word had the authority to make things happen without him actually seeing them. So he trusted that the word of Jesus, the Son of God, could make things happen without him having to see it. So he said, "But say the word and let my servant be healed." And the servant was healed.

It is the same for us. When in need, we don't have to have Jesus come to us directly. We don't have to see Jesus perform a miracle. His Word alone is powerful enough. We trust His Word to do whatever it says. So we, too, say to Jesus, "But say the word and let it be done."

When we worry about our physical needs – whether we will have enough money, food, clothing, shelter, medical insurance and care to survive and thrive, rather than doubt or fear, we pray, "But say the word and let it be done." Jesus says, "Do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." (Matthew 6:31-33) And it shall be done.

When we fret or feel guilty over our sin which can lead to despair and hopelessness, thinking our sin is too great or our sins are too many, rather than worry ourselves sick, we pray, "But say the word and let it be done." Jesus says, "It is finished!" (John 19:30) Your debt to God is paid in full. Sacrifice has been made for every sin you have done, are doing, or ever will do. Atonement has been made for all sins. You are forgiven.

When we become afraid as death approaches, either for us or a loved or a loved one, rather than become angry, afraid, or try to deny death, we pray, "But say the word and let it be done." And Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. (John 11:25-26)

The examples could go on and on. The point remains the same. When Jesus speaks to His people, about His people, or on behalf of His people, things will happen for His people. It doesn't matter whether we see these things happen immediately, can explain these things logically, or understand how these things are going to take place, we can trust that they will happen because the Word of God has power and His will expressed in that word will happen.

There was a series of famous television commercials in the 1970's for a stock brokerage firm named E. F. Hutton. (Just mentioning the name is enough to bring the punch line to the minds of all you old enough to remember.) The commercials were set in busy places – parties, airports, parks and so on. Two people are discussing some financial topic and one will say to the other, "My broker says such and such. What does your broker say?" The second person says, "Well, my broker is E.F. Hutton and E.F. Hutton says..." At that point, all talking and noise cease as everyone in the room scrunches in close to hear what wise financial advice is about to be imparted from E. F. Hutton which will cause financial gain to take place. The tag line at the end is, "When E.F. Hutton talks, people listen." As we consider all our wants and needs, both physical and spiritual, let us consider even more important words and say, "When our God speaks, let us not only listen, but believe. And it shall come to pass" Amen.