June 2, 2013 – 2nd Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 4)

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Jesus was a bit of a healing fool in the Gospel of Luke. Luke records Jesus as healing 18 individuals, of which 6 are found in his Gospel alone, along with several group healing events. This emphasis on healing isn't surprising when we remember that Luke himself was a physician.

And the manner of these healing miracles varied greatly – from Jesus touching someone; to being touched by someone else, as in the case of the hemorrhaging woman; to not even being near the person being healed, as in today's healing story. The only method he didn't seem to use in Luke's account was using spit, as he does in Mark and John. Maybe Luke's medical sensibilities wouldn't allow him to include THOSE healings.

So we've established that healing is important to Luke, but today I'd like to focus our attention on some of the surrounding aspects of this story that make it remarkable. It's kind of like looking at a total eclipse. If you look directly at the sun, all you see is…the sun. Once the sun itself is obscured, you can see all kinds of wonderful things around the edges, like solar flares, or Baily's Beads or the Diamond Ring.

In this case, the healing itself is the sun, and when we look at any of the miracles in the Gospels what we tend to focus on is the miracle itself. But if we can ignore the main event for a moment, all kinds of other surprising things become visible and beautiful to look at.

The first surprise to look at in this miracle is the person requesting it. He is a centurion – a mid- to high-level Roman official. This would have certainly raised some eyebrows in Luke's audience. The Romans were definitely an oftentimes unpleasant presence during Jesus' time, especially around the subject of taxation. But it wasn't until after the Jewish Revolt, starting in 66 AD, that they became really dangerous. The Roman army was told by the Emperor to crush this revolution once and for all. This culminated in the siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD, and the destruction of the Great Temple which was, by Biblical law, the only place where Jewish sacrifices could be made. So not only did over a million people die, but it was pretty much the end of the Jewish religion as they knew it.

The Gospel of Luke is said, by most scholars, to have been written sometime after the destruction of the Temple, so writing about Romans in a positive light might have been considered shocking. But here we have a Roman official not only seeking out Jesus for a healing miracle, but doing so with the cooperation of the Jewish leaders of Capernaum, who are effusive in their praise of this centurion.

"He is worthy of having you do this for him," they tell him, "for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us."

It could be that the centurion was what was known as a God-Fearer. These were Gentiles who adopted most of the Jewish faith but who hadn't been circumcised. Whether he was a God-Fearer or not, this centurion certainly knew Jewish tradition because he insisted that Jesus, as a Rabbi, should not defile himself by entering a Gentile's home.

Or he could have just been a nice guy. This certainly seems to be a possibility, given the way he treats his slave, which is the next surprising thing about this passage.

Some Bible translations change the word *doulos* to "servant," but that's not really what it means. It actually does mean slave, as in someone who is basically owned by someone else, and who has no rights or social standing whatsoever. This is the same word that Paul uses in his letter to the Romans, calling himself a slave of Christ Jesus, and it would have been shocking to his Roman audience.

The word that Luke uses here to describe the feelings the centurion had about his slave is *entimos.* Itdoes carry the meaning to be highly valued, but it's even stronger than that. Other meanings for it are precious, honored, and honorable in rank. This is not an adjective that any normal Roman of that time would apply to a slave. Slaves weren't necessarily treated badly by Roman citizens, unlike our own terrible history of slavery. But while they were valuable, they weren't considered precious, and they certainly had no honorable standing in Roman society.

Luke, as I've said a number of times, was a very clever writer. He didn't do things by accident. Also, it's likely that Luke knew the Apostle Paul, probably at the end of his life in Rome, and would have known his views on slavery. We can't be sure why Luke added the part about the servant being dear to the centurion, but one explanation could be that Luke was using this to parallel God's unconditional love for us, who are not worthy of it.

The third surprising thing in this story is the style of the healing itself. In his healing miracles up to this point, Jesus has always interacted with the person being healed, either by word or by touch. Here, he never even meets the person requesting the healing, the centurion, much less the sick slave himself.

The centurion, through his intermediaries, tells Jesus not to trouble himself by coming to his house and that he is not worthy to meet him in person, but he also tells Jesus that he doesn't need to because he can heal the slave with just a word from wherever he is. The centurion goes on to say that understands Jesus' authority over any illness because he himself has authority, over the men in his command and over his slaves, and knows what just a word can command. And Jesus is amazed at the centurion's faith.

Here is the last surprising thing in this passage. Jesus isn't just pleasantly surprised at the centurion. The word used here is *thaumadzo*, which means, among other things, to be astonished out of your senses. Jesus is only surprised like this a total of three times in the New Testament. One is in Matthew's version of this same story, and the other is in Mark's recounting of the unbelief of the people in Jesus' own home town. His surprise is pretty darned surprising!

Once again, this is not an accidental choice of words on Luke's part, and once again, he is trying to tell us something. Luke's audience, especially his Gentile audience, most likely could not have known Jesus in person. They could not have experienced firsthand the miracles that he did by touch and word. But Luke is telling them, and us, that it's not necessary, that Jesus can work miracles through our faith alone. And that great faith is not a province of one group or another, but is possible for all of us.

Perhaps this miracle story surprised or even shocked Luke's community of Christians, Jew and Gentile alike. And it certainly holds a couple of surprises for us, if we look. Perhaps that was Luke's intention and hope – to surprise us into a new way of thinking.

We don't often look for surprises in our faith life. I think it's human nature to prefer things to be well ordered and predictable, just as we tend to like to put ideas and people into neat categories like right and wrong, liberal and conservative, men and women, us and them. But Jesus didn't do that. Jesus loved all human kind equally and surprisingly – even his enemies.

One of the things Luke shows us today is using a Bible verse or two to divide people rather than unite them is not what God intends. I have to admit that even I have used two of my favorite verses from Mark 12. "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these," to divide people into "those who love" and "those who don't love," and that completely defeats the purpose of those verses.

There's a common saying, "what would Jesus do?" I have to admit I don't always know what Jesus would do – he's continually surprising me. But I think I might know what he wouldn't do. He wouldn't divide. He wouldn't discriminate. He wouldn't exclude. He wouldn't hate.

Wait, maybe I'll take that back. Maybe I DO know what Jesus would do. Jesus would love. He would love extravagantly, single-mindedly, without reserve. And that's what he's calling us to do, too. He's calling us to love where it doesn't make sense, like the centurion's love for his slave. He's calling us to love where it might be dangerous, like the Capernaum Jews' love for a member of the group oppressing them.

Think of a world where, instead of dividing, excluding, and hating, we had love. Simply love. The same love that God showed us when he gave his only son to live and die for our sakes, as one of us. The same love that invites us into communion with God, - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This love transformed the world once, and it can transform it again, through us. If we let it. If we trust it. If we do it.