
“The Miracle of Community”

Luke 7:1-10

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 2, 2013 by the Rev. Luke A. Powery

Jesus entered Capernaum. Right from the beginning, that should suggest something to us as listeners. Do you remember Capernaum? What has happened there in the past is about to happen again. This little city in Galilee is a hot spot for healings. Jesus heals a man of an unclean demon in the Capernaum synagogue (4:31-37). Jesus heals Simon’s mother-in-law of a “high fever” (4:38-39) at Simon’s house in Capernaum. And “all those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them” (4:40-41). Guess where this happened? Capernaum. So when we are told that Jesus entered Capernaum, we should realize what is about to happen. More miracles.

Miracles have always been important for the gospels tradition. Jesus, the miracle worker, is significant in the gospels and particularly in John, miraculous power with all of its signs is demonstrated to show that Jesus is the Son of God, that is, divine (Jn 20:31). Of course, the legacy of rationalization at the heart of the Enlightenment questions the reality of miracles and forms a posture of skepticism toward them. Yet in the ancient world—Jewish and Greco-Roman—the miraculous, the magical, were a part of the cosmological structure of the universe. But I must add that even the apostle Paul never mentions a miracle of Jesus except for the resurrection; the identity of Jesus as a miracle worker is not a part of Pauline theology. But the gospels are different. They are full of miracle stories—nature miracles, like calming the seas, withering trees; and, healing miracles of standard diseases, exorcisms, and resuscitations. In the ancient world, miracles appear to be commonplace and not only Jesus performs them. In our passage, it is not a miracle that Jesus performs a miracle. We’re in Capernaum. The centurion expects Jesus to do that after he “heard about Jesus.” That’s why he sends Jewish elders to ask him to come and heal his slave. And what does Jesus seemingly do, what is implied without Jesus even speaking a healing word as the centurion requested? The slave is found in “good health.” Healing occurs. Another miracle in Capernaum as expected.

The slave was ill and close to death. One who was already isolated by his lower location on the social strata ladder is now more isolated because of his sickness. Set apart by illness. And as many who have been sick and are sick know, the isolation itself can make one even sicker, at distance from a human touch or voice, at distance from one’s old healthy self. We never get to hear the slave’s perspective on his illness and what he’s going through. He never kept a journal about his journey of pain. He’s speechless in today’s text and homebound, a sick and shut-in, maybe watching us on YouTube or on a hospital television. Even during his illness, this slave is on the fringe at the mercy of others, especially those in power like the centurion.

After he is found in good health, which is good news, we must still admit that the slave remains a slave and little hope is offered him for social liberation or mobilization. Jesus does not offer him a great socioeconomic reversal in which the last becomes first nor do we see what the Magnificat promises—that “[God] brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.” The powerful remain enthroned in power and the slave remains in service to the centurion and the hierarchical system of the Roman Empire. There is no social revolution here. Only the realization that the slave, the vulnerable, is still caught in an oppressive system even after his healing. Yet he is healed and given back his physical life. There is a miracle in Capernaum. But it may not be what you think. It may have nothing to do with the slave. He doesn’t really play a major role in the story anyway.

The centurion does. The backbone of the Roman army. The one in charge over 100 soldiers. A military man with great power and might, working on behalf of the Roman Empire. He understands his own

authority—that he can say go and people will go. That he can say come and someone will come. That he can say do this and it will be done. The very first thing he does in this story is use his authority. He give orders to some Jewish elders to ask Jesus to come and heal his slave and then later he sends his friends to Jesus to tell him not to bother coming to his house but to just speak a word to heal his slave. With a skeptical eye, one may think that the centurion wants his slave healed as to not disrupt the system and cheap labor he has in place and this maybe the case. Yet, Jesus is amazed at the centurion’s faith so much so that he tells the crowd “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” The centurion, a Gentile, a representative of the Roman Empire, appeals to Jesus, the embodiment of God’s empire, on behalf of one under him. He recognizes Jesus’ authority and superiority and his lack of control over some things; this in and of itself is a miracle.

The one who was a broker for the imperial system of blessings recognizes that even his own power has limits when facing the unlimited resources of God. Jesus is not his next client so he presents himself as an unworthy servant. This Gentile reveals the Gentile mission of Jesus in which “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” just as John the Baptist proclaimed. The miracle of faith is obvious in this case as an outsider, though a powerful one, submits to Jesus for help. The faith of the centurion is an example of what the gospel of Luke preaches regarding the boundary-crossing mission of Jesus in the Spirit and the centurion and Jesus never actually meet in the story. He never actually sees Jesus but he has faith. Jesus is not amazed at the healing of the slave and he never commands the healing but he is “amazed” by the centurion’s faith just as usually in Luke, the crowd is amazed by the miracles of Jesus (4:22, 36, 5:9, 26). Thus, the critical miracle may be the faith of the centurion. Another miracle in Capernaum. But there may be more.

The slave is healed and the centurion’s faith perhaps initiates it, which is another miracle, dare I say the real miracle in this story. There is a lot of emphasis on the centurion but this Roman interacts with Jewish elders and others on behalf of the sick slave. The need of the slave galvanizes a community to work on his behalf for his healing. Jews and Gentiles, political, military, and religious powers collaborate to seek the health of the least of these, the slave, the one who has no voice and is dying, the one whom we may never see outside in public because he is secluded from society. Those in power take the initiative to aid the slave, the vulnerable one in their midst. The presence of Jesus calls the “better angels” out of those in positions of authority. His presence creates a miracle of community that represents different cultures and strata of society to work across our usual boundaries for the healing of the most disadvantaged among us so that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Without the formation of this community, without their role, the slave might have never been healed. Someone else had to speak out for the slave. Someone else had to tap into salvific power for him, and use their power on his behalf. The real miracle is the miracle of a supportive community that will do anything in its power to help the powerless, to help the voiceless, to help the victims of abuse, to help the sick and shut-in. To recognize the interconnected ecology of the human community. That I cannot be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be (Martin Luther King).

The human community—us—plays a role in the healing of others. Jesus is the healer but he uses us in the process. Remember, he doesn’t even give a specific command for the healing of the slave yet the slave is found in good health. Speaking for and with those who may have no voice. Searching for and using resources that may help one who is ill. Doing all that is in our power for the wellness of another, even if they are not in our social click because the health of a community is only as good as the health of its weakest member. I commend this community healthcare plan to you.

Rather than isolating the sick and helpless, may we surround them with our best creative efforts and loving support and our prayers to Jesus for their healing. And what we may find is that in working on behalf of the healing of others, especially the vulnerable, we may find our own healing and salvation as a community of God. Where there is neither Jewish elder nor Gentile centurion, neither sick slave nor free, neither male nor female, neither high church nor low church nor no church, but all walks of life as one

community who does everything in its power and utilizes every social advantage it has to help the disadvantaged—the poor, the uneducated, the prisoner trying to re-enter society, victims of violence and abuse. This would be a community created by Christ.

This is the real miracle in Capernaum—a glimpse of the realization of an interrelational, interconnected web of healing by the grace of God. No one should exist in isolation for an individual is a person through and with others. No one should have to live life and suffer through life alone and with Jesus, as this story reveals, no one will. May we be that community of God for the healing of our brothers and sisters. That would be a real miracle. May it be so in the name of Jesus. Amen.