

THE CHALLENGE OF FATHER'S DAY

Luke 7:1-10

On the Liturgical calendar, today is the 12th Sunday in Ordinary Time. Now, that doesn't sound very distinguished, does it? But my planning calendar has another list called "additional important dates": And on that calendar this is Father's Day. So forgive me, please, if I forsake the church plan and pick up on the commercial theme. This is the day, let's say, to honor those men who do – or should – live out in their families the love they find modeled in Jesus. We honor today those men who make promises and keep them, men who put their families first and who seek to set a positive example for those whom they love.

Our scripture lesson for today is about such a man. He was a Roman citizen and military officer – a centurion. We're not really sure whether he was a father or not. In fact, we don't even know his name. But there are some things about him we do know.

For one thing, we know he had a tender heart. The centurion was a Roman military leader in command of a Company of about a hundred men. He had a servant who was very dear to him. We can speculate that the servant was an older man who had been with the family for many years. Perhaps he had helped raise the centurion from childhood – a male nanny perhaps. Now this servant was critically ill and the centurion was upset. He was genuinely concerned about his servant and he wanted something done to help him. You see, real men have always had tender hearts. (And, it definitely is not true that real men don't cry.) If they can help, they do.

The concern of the centurion for his servant (father?) reminds me of the story of another military officer – a U. S. Air Force pilot who was shot down over Iraq in the early days of the 1991 Gulf War. He was heartlessly paraded

before the Iraqi nation. His face was swollen from injuries suffered in the aircraft crash and from being pummeled by Saddam Hussein's thugs. Fearing for his life, he followed the Iraqi script and woodenly mumbled a few words of propaganda into the television camera. Then, with a sudden burst of vitality, he took his chances and added the words, "Honey, I love you. Tell the kids to study hard." What a heart-stopping display of the love of a husband and father and a testament to the power of heart and home.

Now back to the centurion, determined to help his servant. That was the kind of man he was. But what could he do? He was no doctor. And even if he were, what could have been done with the primitive medicine of that day? Then he heard about Jesus and we learn a second thing about him. He was a man who respected other people's beliefs. The centurion heard that Jesus was a man who had the power of healing. "Ah," he must have thought, "maybe he can do something for my servant." So he made plans to solicit Jesus' help. Instead of personally approaching the Master, though, he sent a contingent of Jewish elders to plead his case for him. Here is what the elders said to Jesus about the centurion: "He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation and he built us our synagogue." Notice that not all Romans were oppressors. Here was a man of power and authority, but he was also a man who had respect for those who believed and acted differently than he. He even helped them build their synagogue. Other Romans were more prone to tear down synagogues than to build them.

Here's a third thing we learn about him: This centurion was a man of genuine humility. Jesus was persuaded by the testimony of the elders and went with them. When he was close to the house, the centurion sent friends to him saying, "Lord do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof ..."

Is there any quality more appealing in a man or woman than genuine humility? I'm not talking about that odious form of low self-esteem that causes persons to wallow in self pity and to allow others to walk all over them. Certainly the centurion was no doormat. But he recognized Jesus' power and he was humble enough to ask Jesus' help. If he had been a proud man, he would never have sent for Jesus. But he was a caring man, a man who respected the beliefs of others, a humble man.

There's one final thing we need to observe about the centurion. He was a man of faith. You know how the story ends. The centurion sends a message to Jesus: "Lord," he says, "do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word and let my servant be healed ..." Did you get that? "Just say the word Lord, and my servant will be healed." When Jesus heard this, he marveled, and said to the multitude that followed him, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." And when those who had been sent to Jesus returned to the centurion's home, they found the slave well. The centurion was a man who believed that Jesus could do what he said he would do. We need that same kind of faith.

Do you know what would really help our families on this Father's Day? It would be for parents to genuinely trust Christ. Some homes are so tense. Tension in the home causes minor disagreements to escalate into heated arguments. Soon communication breaks down, resulting in sullenness and sometimes, even violence. As parents, we need to take our problems to Christ in prayer. We need to relax in the knowledge that Jesus is able to work miracles in human lives. It may take time, but if we make Jesus Christ a partner in the raising of our children, we will not be living in a continuing panic that causes us to overreact.

This Roman centurion was a caring man, a tolerant and humble man, a man of deep and genuine faith. How the world needs such men! How wives need such husbands! How children need such fathers!

Let me read you parts of a letter written by another famous soldier: Gen. Norman Schwartzkopf, who wrote to his family on the eve of the Gulf War. I'm sure the letter has been imprinted on each of their hearts forever.

“My dearest Wife and Children,” the letter begins. “The war clouds have gathered on the horizon and I have already issued the terrible orders that will let the monster loose. I wish with every fiber of my body that I would never have had to issue those commands. But it is now too late, and for whatever purpose God has, we will soon be at war.

“Brenda, I have never been very eloquent with words and far too guarded in expressing my love for you. I truly regret this but it is the way I am. That is why I wanted more than anything else to write to you tonight and tell you how much you mean to me. I cannot tell you how many times I have thanked God that I married you, nor can I adequately tell you how many times you have made me so proud that you are my wife. Especially during these past difficult five months it has given me great strength to know that you were there, always there, taking care of our family and so many others. Thank you for that and so many other things: the loving, the understanding, the forgiving, the helping, the caring, the supporting – just being my Brenda Pauline.

“Cindy, Jessica, Christian, I hope you know how much I love you. The three of you have become the most important reason to me for my being on this earth. I could lose everything I possess and if I still had you, life would be worth living; I could be rich and famous and have everything I desire but without you my life would be meaningless, my heart would be empty, and I would not want to live. The three of you are my immortality! You are the

best thing I will leave behind when I leave this world. And you have each returned that love to me. I am a father who knows his children love him and that makes me a very lucky man! As I told you at Christmas, I am so proud of each of you for what each of you are. Be proud of yourselves, for you are fine human beings. Thank you for being my children; thank you for letting me be your father, thank you for loving me!

“Take care of each other, love each other, and if it be God’s will, we shall be together soon. If that should not happen, then know wherever I am I will be with each of you every day, always! Your loving husband and father. H. Norman. Dad”

(Gen. Norman H. Schwarzkopf, *The Autobiography*, pp 412, 413)

It has been said that “a child is not likely to find a Father in God, unless he finds something of God in his father.” Recently a preschool Sunday School class was asked to draw a picture of God. The children came up with some pretty good pictures of clouds, rainbows and giants. When the last girl showed her picture, it portrayed a man with a suit and tie on. Before the teacher could ask her about it, she said, “I don’t know what God looks like, so I just drew my daddy instead.”

Dads, we have an awesome, God-given responsibility. May God help us to be faithful to that duty.

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First Presbyterian Church, Martinsville
21 June 2009**

