

Sermon for Sunday, June 2, 2013 Service of Holy Baptism Luke 7:1-10 "Transformed"

When I was a little girl, maybe seven years old, I was quite ill. This was in the 1950s, and although the polio vaccine had been discovered and I had had my dose of it, my weakness and a limp that I suddenly developed caused my parents to fear that I had polio, a disease that promised at best a bad limp and at worst life in an iron lung. I had a high fever, and I can still recall my mother bathing my forehead with a washcloth dipped in cool water. It was the sweetest feeling, that cool damp washcloth. It helped my fever, of course – it was a recommended way to lower a high temperature – but it also helped my soul. I could feel my mother's love through the cloth. I felt safe, even though I sensed my mother's fear about the disease. She battled my mystery illness even as she battled her own fear with the greatest of medicines: love. Love in a wet terry cloth washrag. It was as healing as the medicine Doctor Inman gave me, as the diagnosis that this was not the dreaded polio, but some other less malign infection. Love transformed our fears. Love transformed and healed.

In today's gospel, we hear another story of healing. Jesus was approached by some temple elders – clearly he already had quite the reputation as a healer – and they came on behalf of a surprising petitioner...a Roman centurion. This man was a powerful military commander, a representative of the empire that was oppressing Israel. As a Roman, he had to consider the Caesar a god, and he had to believe in the entire pantheon of Roman gods. And yet, when his servant became ill and was close to death, he was desperate to find healing for the slave. The gospel calls this slave someone whom the centurion valued highly. Now we might think that this was a matter of protecting personal property. If a slave owner thinks he is losing a slave who is productive, of course he values him highly. But the evangelist Luke uses a very specific word to describe how this centurion feels about his slave: *entimos*. Entimos. It means something or someone precious, honored, esteemed. Perhaps even – dare I say it? - loved. At the very least, this centurion held this slave in high esteem, and he was willing to do anything, even the potentially treasonous act of appealing to a God not of the Roman pantheon, to secure healing for this beloved slave.

So back to the story – the centurion asked some of the temple elders to petition to Jesus on his behalf. Might they have done this because they were afraid of retribution if they didn't? We might think so, except for the fact that Luke says "He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." If they hadn't held him in high regard, they most likely would have said something like "The Roman centurion who oversees our area has asked us to ask you." They wouldn't have endorsed him as they did. So this was a good guy, and they saw his care for the sick slave, and they also knew that the Roman centurion was taking a tremendous risk asking for Jesus' help, so they went to Jesus.

And Jesus knew how high the stakes were for the centurion, and he also knew love when he saw it. The love that the centurion had for the slave, the love that the centurion seemed to have for the people of Israel, the love that the elders had for the centurion. And love is, after all, at the heart of healing.

And so Jesus said yes to the request and headed down the road to the centurion's home. But before he even got there, the centurion sent a message. "Don't come." What? Did the centurion change his mind? No, it was something else. The centurion said "I'm not worthy to have

you come into my house. Just command it from afar, and I know it will happen. I'm a soldier, I know about orders. If you order it, it will happen."

Now a more suspicious soul might say that the Roman centurion didn't want to be seen with this Jewish healer, didn't want to put himself in the position of explaining to his overlords why he was looking for help from a foreign God. But the fact was everyone in the area already knew the story. When he went to the temple to ask for help from the elders, the story probably spread like wildfire throughout the community and beyond. That horse was already out of the barn.

So we hear his words "I am not worthy," and we don't hear some strategic maneuvering – we hear an honest recognition on the part of the centurion that he wasn't worthy, that Jesus was important, more important than the centurion, more important than Caesar...and Jesus saw the risk the centurion was taking and the love behind the willingness to take that risk, and Jesus loved him for it, and granted his request. The slave was healed.

And Jesus affirmed that centurion's faith. Because what is faith but the sense that God will do what makes no sense, simply out of love for us? Love is at the heart of healing, a ridiculous and irrational love that defies common sense, political wisdom, the rules of the scientific world around us.

And love is also at the heart of the sacrament of baptism that we will celebrate in a little bit.

Baptism is about that deep, deep love that God has for us. In baptism we are forever initiated into the Body of Christ by water and the Holy Spirit. We are marked as God's own forever. We make promises to God, or if we are too little to make the promises ourselves, as with Julia and Elora, our godparents make promises for us that we will reaffirm when we are confirmed. We feel the soothing water on our foreheads, as I felt the soothing cloth on my brow, and as the centurion's slave felt God's healing grace. The water washes away that which separates us from God. We are reborn in it, made complete in God's love.

Jesus made the slave well, because of love. God's love, the centurion's love, the elders' love, all came together to make the slave well.

God makes those who are baptized complete in his wild and inclusive love. God makes them his own forever. And love will continue to draw us to him, more deeply in love, now and forever.

We pray for God's blessing on those who are baptized today, and for all who love them. We pray to the One who loves us always, and our hearts are made whole by that love.

Amen.