

Are You the One?
Only Say the Word
Luke 7: 1-10

**First Presbyterian Church
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Last summer I got to take an online course developed by John Yorke, a writer and producer for the BBC. Called *Story into Script*, the course taught us to see the underlying structure in all good scripts for film or television. We got to watch lots of movies, but now with eyes trained to see the turning points, to understand how one act leads to another, why some scenes work and others don't. And we got to do some writing. I got pretty excited imagining a new story for *Inspector Lewis*, one of my favorite British mystery shows. And figuring out how to turn a documentary on the Panama Canal into an action movie. Our final project was to create what they call a "treatment" for a film. That's a scene by scene overview of a story that you would send to a studio.

Now I know very well that my future does not lie in writing screenplays. I took the course because I wanted to understand more about how sermons actually follow a story structure. There is a narrative arc in a good sermon that takes the listeners along on a journey. We encounter obstacles in daily life, discover truth that gives us the key to victory, and then engage the fight with sin and doubt so that we can, in Christ's power, live transformed lives. You and I go on a journey each week, leaving the ordinary world and entering the extraordinary realm where we encounter the living Jesus. If the story works, we leave here sent back out into the daily world lit up with Christ's grace and everlasting life. In that way, we go out to change the world based on how the Triune God has changed us.

So I wrote up my treatment more as an idea for a sermon series than a movie. (Though, of course, if any studio wants to buy the rights, I'm all for it!) All summer I was drawn again and again to Luke 7. I realized that this chapter is a self-contained, five act story that revolves around one central question about Jesus. "Are you the one, or should we look for another?" This was the question John the Baptist asked Jesus right at the midpoint of this chapter. It's the deep question we all carry into church. I'm trying to get along in the world. I'm trying to make sense of the chaos around us. I'm trying to bear up under the sorrow. I'm trying to live a more flourishing life. I know I need someone to help me. Jesus, are you the one?

Or should we look for another? Here's how I set up my pitch for a movie based on Luke 7 called, *Are You the One?*

In the early days of his public career, the magnetic and polarizing Jesus of Nazareth engages the forces that destroy human flourishing: illness, death, fear, pride, shame and self-righteousness. Jesus encounters these powers embodied in the characters of one sparkling chapter from Luke's gospel. The *inciting incident* is the outrageous request of a Roman centurion that Jesus pollute himself by visiting his home. The battle thickens the day Jesus shockingly stops a funeral procession. The center point occurs in the way Jesus answers the query of his imprisoned cousin John: "Are you the one, or should we look for another?" Then, Jesus deliberately creates crisis as he provokes his audience to make their own decisive answer. In the conclusion, Jesus unmask the hypocrisy of loveless law-keeping in a showdown with a Pharisee, while accepting the devotion of a compromised woman. By the end, both the enduring loyalty of Jesus' supporters and the murderous resistance of his detractors become inevitable.

That's the overview of our five-part series. Today we look at Act 1. It opens with Jesus entering the village of Capernaum. This is immediately significant. The Son of God came to our earth as a man. But he didn't set up shop in a mountain retreat or riverside palace where the wealthy and able could quest to find him. He initiated relationship. He came to villages where ordinary people work, suffer, yearn and love. In this village, there was stationed a Roman military official called a centurion. He sent urgent messengers to beg Jesus to come into his house. He pleaded for Jesus to commit an unthinkable act for a devout Jew: to willingly enter the home of a pagan. This centurion made his outrageous request because he had in his household a slave who was gravely ill. Though he was but a servant, the centurion loved him. He valued his slave for his work and as a person. The servant grew close to death and the centurion was desperate to save him.

The centurion made his request through two Jewish elders who told Jesus how worthy this man was to receive a favor. Jesus said nothing in reply. His disciples must have panicked. Surely he won't go inside the house of the enemy! He'll be ritually unclean for a week. It will be a scandal. What will happen to the ministry if Jesus can't teach or heal for 7 days?" This is what is known in scripts as the *inciting incident*. Something happens that is unexpected. It demands change. If he accepts the challenge, the protagonist enters a journey towards something new.

Without a word, Jesus gestured to the elders to lead him. He started toward the centurion's home. Jesus had been invited to do something that was, on the face

of it, wrong and shameful. The centurion asked more than he should. And Jesus agreed to go. He accepted the challenge. The Son of God entered our world and did not intend to keep his hands clean. He went straight to the mess of our needs.

Suddenly three Roman officials hurried down the road toward Jesus. The disciples bristled with anticipation of hostility. These Romans were friends of the centurion with another message. “The centurion says, ‘Do not trouble yourself to come further. I am not worthy that you should come under the roof of my house. I am a soldier. I understand authority. Only say the word and my servant will be healed.’”

This is the moment in a story called the *reveal*. Something comes to light that unlocks the whole story. This is the knowledge after which nothing would be the same. It will make a life and death difference.

Jesus stared at the Romans in growing wonder. He understood what had happened. For the first time in the story, he speaks. “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” It almost goes without saying that when the elders and the friends returned to the centurion’s house, they found the beloved servant on his feet rejoicing in restored health.

In the gospel stories, Jesus’ power to heal is never in doubt. When Jesus was brought to trial before his crucifixion, he was accused of blasphemy. He was accused of being a rival to Caesar. But he was never accused of being a hoax. None of his enemies ever said, “Jesus claims to have healed the blind, straightened the lame and cleansed the lepers, but look, here are people who say it was a trick. They’re still not cured.” Such doubt, though, was never raised. Even the most unbelieving scholars have to admit that friend and enemy alike admitted Jesus’ healing power.

In the gospel stories, the healing comes off as the easy part. What matters most to Jesus seems to be his interaction with people before the healing. But that raises some questions for us. If Jesus can just heal people with a word, why doesn’t he just do it? When we pray for miracles of healing, why do they so seldom happen? In fact, it seems to be a fairly common crisis of faith for people when they experience praying fervently for a loved one and not seeing that one healed. We prayed and prayed. We gathered elders. We were part of a dozen prayer chains. We fasted. We believed. It didn’t work. God didn’t work. How can he be real?

It's crucial that we be able to reply well. And to do so, we've got to let go of some shallow but popular forms of Christianity. We have to take up the whole story by which we are living. So, do I believe that Jesus still has the power to heal people miraculously? I do. Have I seen instances where healing can't be explained by any other reason than God? I have. Do I think there is a difference between going through suffering or illness with prayer versus without prayer? I definitely do. But here's the news that is sorrowful to us in the present moment. The people whom Jesus healed all later died. He took away what was oppressing them in the moment. But he did not yet remove the curse of death. He did not eliminate the fact of our mortality. The life span of believing Christians throughout history does not vary appreciably from the lifespan of nonbelievers. Violence, accident, disease, aging. They still afflict all of us one way or another and sooner or later. It hurts. It's hard. That's Christian realism.

Christianity falls apart if this world the way it is remains all that there is. Without the next life, we've got nothing. Without the hope of the resurrection of the body into a new creation, we've got no reply to the suffering in the world. If the idea of your best life now is uninterrupted prosperity, ever increasing health, and sunnier and sunnier days, then you're living a sad fantasy. Jesus does not get his disciples out of the suffering common to humanity. In fact, it quite often gets harder for his people who live as exiles in this world.

It's time for Christians to stop quoting Jeremiah 29: 11 out of context. We use it in locker room speeches and graduation addresses. We mistakenly promise our youth that God plans to fulfill their fondest dreams of success. We quote it, "I know the plans I have for you says the LORD, plans for wholeness and not evil, to give you a future and a hope." It's a great promise. God does indeed desire our wholeness and our future. But look closely at the context. This promise was made to people who were about to see all their dreams, their very way of life, vanish. They were about to go into 70 years of exile. Seven decades of being virtual slaves in Babylon lay before them. The people who heard the promise and most of their children would not live to see it even begin to come true. We can't use that passage to promise people that God will give us the life we've always dreamed for ourselves. It doesn't work that way. Jeremiah wrote about the *long term*. He saw Israel's exile and future return. That passage symbolized the passing of the old world into the new creation. It previewed the way in which Jesus would pass through the exile of the cross and open up the resurrection of the dead. It gives us hope that after we pass through the course of mortal life into death we will arrive at still more life in restored communion with God and one another.

What Jesus did for others in his healing ministry was only a temporary fix of their mortal suffering. But Jesus healing works had two, deep, eternal purposes. 1) Jesus reveals his Father's heart toward us. God cares about our suffering. He has entered the world to do something about it. He has not forgotten us. He loves us and wants to restore us. 2) Jesus' miracles give us a taste of the future. They were the appetizer for a great banquet yet to come. They are the first glimpse of the future God has promised his people through Jesus. He *will* make all things right. He *will* enact justice. He *will* wipe away all tears, remove all disease and raise his people to resurrection bodies outfitted for eternal life. The healing Jesus did and the healings we see today are the down payment of the inheritance that will be ours. Knowing these two things doesn't end our mortality. It doesn't remove suffering. But it gives us hope. It changes us. It sweeps up into participating in God's great work of redeeming the world one person at a time.

What was it in the centurion's response that so moved Jesus? Luke tells us that Jesus *marveled* at him. Jesus heard something he was delighted to hear, longing to hear, but totally did not expect to hear. Jesus heard authentic humility. "I am not worthy to have you under my roof." Jesus heard love that dared to ask anyway. "Only you can save my servant." Jesus heard faith that came right out of the man's deepest understanding of how his life worked. A man who lived under orders and gave orders recognized in Jesus the ultimate authority to speak a word and have it enacted. The centurion saw the power of the Creator Word of God who spoke and worlds came into being. "Only say the word and my servant will be healed." He believed from both heart and mind.

This is what our God is after as he bears with the pain and sorrow of this weary world. Of course he could call the whole thing to halt right now. Of course he could just fix us. He could make us obey. He could make us love him. But God endures this whole system for one reason. Love. Love that prizes above all else the free reply of "I love you too." He doesn't want machines. He wants people who trust him to be their God. He woos us. He calls us. He yearns over us. He assures us that we can live now with the hope of all that is to come.

We can, in this way, say with the centurion. Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under the roof of my house. But only say the word and I will be healed. We can, in this realistic way, pray for others. Holy Lord Jesus you entered the pollution of this dark and sinful world, though we were not worthy to receive

you. So hear me as I lift up these one dear to me and to you. Only speak the word, and they will be healed—in just the way you see fit.

For more on story structure, see John Yorke, *Into the Woods: A Five Act Journey Into Story* or google johnyorkestory.