

Belonging

Pentecost 2C—May 29, 2016

[This transcript was meant for a spoken performance. It is not optimized for a reading experience.]

I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.

Will you pray with me? From our beginning, far before time, we were called into relationship. One with another, we make contact with the holy. Amen, may this be so!

The Easter season is over. Pentecost has come and gone. Trinity Sunday was last week. Now we settle into the rhythm of the season after.

Before we jump into today's story, let's take a look at some historical background of the sacred text. As I had said before Lent and Easter, we would be spending the majority of the time with the gospel of Luke.

Some of you might remember being taught that Luke was a physician. That is a traditional stance of whom Luke was. Others may have held that, although he was not one of the 12, he was an important influential figure with the first disciples.

Those are some traditional views and they are far, far from reality.

What we must understand is that we do not know who wrote the biblical text. Authorship is unknown. Yes, there is a link between the Gospel According to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. The link is that they were most likely, probably, maybe the one and same *unknown* writer.

What we also know is that the unknown writer, like the writer of Matthew is plagiarizing. He or she is stealing ideas from one text and placing those ideas into his or her narrative. The common source, where Luke borrowed from, was the gospel of Mark.

You might be sitting here this morning thinking, "Yeah, so what? What does this have to do with anything?" Follow the trail with me.

If the writer of Luke used Mark in their writing, we know that the gospel was not written at the approximate time of Jesus. Tradition holds that Jesus lived and died somewhere, approximately, maybe around 30 AD.

We know Mark's gospel was written after the destruction of the temple, the second temple. That would date Mark's gospel around 70 AD.

Luke borrows from Mark, so we are looking at a writing that comes in the last quarter of the first century. More specifically, we are looking at a writing that is written almost in the second century.

Are you still with me? This is a late first century writing. The writing is in Greek. Greek was the dominant language of the Roman Empire. The writing is also considered sophisticated, meaning the writer is good at their craft of writing.

We know that Israel, in the scheme of the Roman Empire, is really a rather insignificant place. Within the Roman hierarchy, no one who was anybody wanted to be assigned work in Israel.

Mind you, by the time today's gospel was written, this outpost territory called Israel has settled down. Rome had defeated, barely, the Jewish revolt. Rome had destroyed and killed off as many and most of those living in and around Jerusalem. There was no deportation or exile for the Jews in Jerusalem that time. The temple had been completely destroyed ... nothing was left.

When I say nothing, I really mean nothing. Nothing was left of the temple the centre of Jewish faith. How many of you have seen pictures of the western wall, sometimes called the wailing wall? How many of you think that this is the last remnant of the magnificent structure? If you said yes, that was the traditional view. That was the traditional view; that was the mythological story that has been passed on from generation to generation.

Along comes science combined with sound archaeology and, lo and behold, the western wall is in fact not a part of the second temple, or even Herod's temple, but was built much later.

We know that, by the time today's gospel was written, Jewish believers in Jesus have been shunned by all the various forms of Jewish practice and culture.

With the ever-present scrutiny of the Empire, a difficult life was made worse. Think about today. When times are tough—and right now across our planet times are tough—what happens? What is happening? Think of Donald Trump. When times are tough, we look for a scapegoat. We look for someone to blame. We look for someone other than ourselves to point a finger towards.

When times are tough, the vulnerable are at risk. *When times are tough, the vulnerable are at risk.* Do you think Hitler was the last political leader of ethnic and cultural genocide?

At the time of the Gospel according to Luke, if you were Jewish, you were being constantly watched, constantly stopped, constantly contained, constantly murdered.

At the time of the Gospel According to Luke, if you were a follower of the way of Jesus, you not only had the Empire breathing down your neck, you also had the Jews watching; watching and pointing.

When times are tough, the vulnerable are at risk. The late first century was not the zenith of the Christian movement. To follow the way of the Nazarene meant you would be shunned and at risk of being the scapegoat of whatever might have gone wrong.

Harvests were bad—because of the Christians.

Rains were heavy—because of the Christians.

A baby was born with a genetic defect—because of the Christians.

An earthquake came—because of the Christians.

Rome burned—yup, apparently the Christians did that too.

There is our backdrop, the background from which today's gospel emerges.

For the next three weeks, we are going to explore similar stories as today. What is clear from the get-go of today's story is that *"A centurion in Capernaum had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death."* Catch the relationship: a centurion of the Roman Empire, a commander, has a slave that he values. What the value of the slave was, you get to play with. Maybe this was not just a slave; maybe he was also the lover of the commander. Whoever or whatever he or she was, the centurion is really concerned.

When he heard about this holy man named Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. If you are a commander in the Roman Empire, you are used to commanding and sending forth.

When the Jewish elders came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "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."

This story does not fit the everyday life of the people of Israel. This story does not fit into the customs of the Jewish people. The centurion is an outsider. Not only is he an outsider he, is a warrior who has been hardened by battle and risen to the rank of leading other warriors. The centurion is an outsider who belongs to the Empire. This outsider was the enemy.

What on Earth is the gospel writer communicating? The writer was speaking to the Lucan church in the late first century.

The slave, lover or not, is a vulnerable person. When times are tough, the vulnerable are at risk. A slave is the lowest-ranking person in the Roman familial system and therefore is the most vulnerable. The outsider values the vulnerable.

This outsider is also a benefactor. The one perceived to be the enemy is not displaying the expected enemy behaviour. He is financially supporting the building of a meeting place for the Jewish people—another vulnerable population.

The storyteller continues and writes that Jesus went with Jewish Elders but, when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, *"Lord, 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."*

Jesus is on his way to meet with the enemy, the outsider and the centurion has sent out his friends. They meet Jesus on the way. More others, more enemies, more of those who hold power meet Jesus on the way and they convey a deep, deep humility. I am not worthy. I have commanded hundreds of men. I have spent years in hard-won battles in the name of Rome and still I am not worthy for you to come to my household.

Imagine hearing this story for the first time in that first century. You, the listeners, are the vulnerable ones. And you are being given an image that even the powerful, even the oppressor, even the enemy, even the one you hate and the one you fear is worthy, for no other reason but because they exist.

This is an important note. The other, in this case the Roman centurion, had to do absolutely nothing to make contact with the Divine. Do you get this?

He had to do nothing.

He did not have to be born again.

He did not have to take out a membership. He did not have to attend lessons.

He did not have to declare one thing or another.

The writer is saying that this one was worthy of contact with God simply because that one exists.

Luke writes that Jesus speaks: *"I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."*

The centurion stepped forward ... that is all he needed to do: step forward. His slave was important to him. His slave was in need. The centurion was in need. The one he was in relationship with was sick. He stepped forward. He reaches out and sends for help.

He is in need and voices his need.

Change was only possible when the commander was willing to take a step towards something different.

Change is only possible when *you* are willing to take a step towards something different.

Today's story is about taking a step forward.

Have you ever felt stuck in a situation, stuck in where you are at in your life?

This ancient writing continues to speak to us today.

Imagine how hard stepping forward would have been for the powerful centurion. The powerful was powerless and stepped from his powerlessness and said, "Help. I need help."

I have a little card that has sat in my bedroom for a number of years. The card simply kind of speaks to today's gospel and my message:

If you have a preference, voice it.

If you have a question, ask it.

If you want to cry, bawl.

If you need help, raise your hand

And jump up and down.

Sam Keen writes in his book **LEARNING TO FLY**, *"To know yourself you have to sit still, wait, meditate, but to be yourself you have to act."* You have to act. You have to step forward.

No one is unworthy of our care—no one. Our task, our sacred practice must be one of paying attention. We must pay attention to our needs.

We must pay attention to the needs of another.

The work of the Christian community, the work of us is to move towards the other and discover there is no other. There is only us. There is us, all of us, spinning on this planet together.

For the past number of years, your board at Kimbourne Park United Church has been exploring a sense of mission for this congregation. As we go deeper into this exploration, I hope we can hold onto this first-century image of stepping forward and being met for no other reason but that the other exists. Devoid of requirements, needs are met because we are in relationship with everything that was, everything that is and everything not quite yet.

Are you ready to listen for the voices as they come forward? Are you able to respond to the needs, the questions, the concerns, the fears and uncertainties? Are you able to offer your shoulder to cry on and arms to support? Are you willing to see?

What does your church look like? What are you willing to become? That is what storyteller is inviting the listener to consider: what does community look like now? What are you willing to become?

When we can begin to answer these questions in our personal life and when we can begin to answer these questions in our communal life, we will step forward, act and encounter because this will be good news indeed.