

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge
Church Year C
Date: 5/29/16
Season: The Second Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 7:1-10

As I've been a cog in the cancer machine – and those of you who have experience with cancer either directly or through a loved one or friend, know what I'm talking about – I've become ever more aware of how healing prayer works. I have certainly observed over the years many folks for whom prayers have been offered who have experienced significant benefits. Peace. Hope. Relationships strengthened and healed. Occasionally a medically inexplicable remission or cure. So I'm a big believer in healing prayer.

But until I became a cog in the cancer machine, I had never been on the receiving end of such intentional, sustained, and systematic healing prayer as I have lately experienced. And it's been quite an experience to hear my name spoken aloud Sunday by Sunday here in my community. It's been quite an experience to know that my name is being spoken aloud in other faith communities nearby and far away, often by people I've never met. It's been quite an experience to know that old friends, some of whom I haven't seen in many years, have been saying my name aloud. It's been quite an experience to hear that from folks for whom "prayer" is a word that they would normally run away from, tell me they are sending "good energy" or "best wishes" or "good thoughts" my way. All of those are healing prayers as far as I'm concerned.

More prayers, either spoken aloud or in cards and notes and emails, have spoken to me of love and love's great by product, hope.

Hope and healing go hand in hand. And in every one of those prayers, I have heard the voice and seen the face of Jesus.

And so that brings us to this morning's gospel reading. Just before this story, Jesus has gathered his followers around him and taught what's known in Luke's gospel as the Sermon on the Plain. It's Luke's version of the more familiar Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. Jesus has described life in the kingdom of Heaven and described it as a present reality and not something far off in the future. Now he moves on to Capernaum where his reputation as a healer has preceded him. It's even come to the attention of as important a gentile as this Roman centurion. He must have been a very good man. We're told he loves the people he was sent to rule over and has even built their synagogue. And he has a slave he loves so dearly, that he goes to great lengths to reach out to do everything he can for this slave who's on the verge of death. Great love it seems leads to great faith, in this case, faith in a God who is completely foreign to the centurion's own

background. Yet, he must have seen something in the lives and the faith of the Jesus whom he was ruling over. And so it was perhaps in desperation that he turned to an itinerant rabbi of this foreign religion.

Now, often when we think of this story, a story which is also told in Matthew's gospel, we focus on Jesus and the centurion. They seem to be the two main actors here. But there are some other actors here and it's these other actors, the friends of the centurion that are really on my mind right now. You'll note that the centurion never directly meets Jesus. It's his friends who communicate his needs – and his faith – to Jesus. They're the go-betweens. We don't actually know the exact words that the centurion spoke to the Jewish elders. What they heard was a man deeply worried about someone he loved who was dying. They translated that concern – that need – to Jesus. This story of healing – this story of great love and great faith – doesn't happen without the centurion's friends carrying his story to Jesus.

We all have seasons in life when we need someone to carry our story to Jesus. In this season of my life, it has been you – you my friends – who have carried my story to Jesus. That's what healing prayer does. When we pray for someone in need – someone who is ill – someone who is grieving – someone who is lonely – we are carrying that person's story to Jesus. In the strangest and most beautiful way, we help to open that person's heart to Jesus. You see. Jesus' healing touch, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is always there and ready for us. But our own hearts need to be ready to receive it.

One of my favorite Easter hymns is "Now the Green Blade Riseth. Listen to the last verse:

*"When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,
Thy touch can call us back to life again,
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green"*

The moments when our hearts are wintry, grieving or in pain is sometimes the very moments when we can't open them to Jesus. That's where our friends come in. Our friends pray for us when we can't pray for ourselves.

Now I don't want to overlook the centurion. Remember, he is the one with the courage to ask for healing. To ask for prayer. And he does so in the most humble and faithful way. He asks for help. He asks for what he needs. Even though he says, "I am not worthy." He still trusts God's loving grace enough to ask for what he needs. You know, I've seen over the years of my ministry too many people who don't or won't ask for what they need. Who are reluctant or shy or tell themselves the story that somehow they're not worthy to come to Jesus and ask for help. Is that you? Have you ever told yourself the

story that you're not worthy of getting help from Jesus? If you have, and many of us have, let's be clear, take a moment to reflect on the story of Peter and Jesus and the foot-washing. You remember, Jesus says to Peter, "I'm going to wash your feet." It was a sign of Jesus' servant ministry to the world. And Peter saying "Oh no Lord, you'll not wash my feet, I'll wash yours." Peter felt he wasn't worthy to wash Jesus' feet. And Jesus response is curious. "Unless you allow me to wash your feet, you will have no share of me."

Really receiving Jesus invites us into a place of deep humility. A place of true openness. A place where we allow our hearts to be exposed and vulnerable. Jesus was calling Peter to a place of deep vulnerability. He calls us there too. So the word here for us is to be vulnerable enough to ask for Jesus when we need him. And sometimes the best way to do this is to ask our friends for help. Ask our friends to pray for us. Ask our friends to take our needs to Jesus.

That's certainly what you – my dearly beloved friends – have done for me. In your prayers, in your notes and cards and emails and "Attaboys" and your hugs and your love – you have taken my needs to Jesus. And for that I will be ever grateful. You and your prayers are at the heart of my healing. So in your time of need, turn to Jesus. Let your friends know you're hurting. Let your faith community know your needs. We are here to carry your needs to Jesus for you. Amen.