

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The Greatest Compliment Jesus Ever Gave

Matthew 8:5-13

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Rev. Dr. Charley Reeb, Senior Pastor

One thing you can count on with Jesus – he is full of surprises. Today we turn our attention to a person who received what is perhaps the greatest compliment Jesus ever gave anyone. And, typical Jesus, the person who received this compliment was the most unlikely person in the world. And therein lies the lesson for us today.

Before I introduce you to this unlikely person and why and how he impressed Jesus so much, I want to tell you how important today's message could be for you.

Today's message has the power to help you overcome your doubts. I imagine there is a lot of doubt in the sanctuary today. None of us are immune to doubt. As humans, it is often natural to doubt. We doubt our faith. We doubt God. We doubt the people we are supposed to trust. We doubt ourselves. To a certain point, doubt is healthy and normal. It leads to greater truth and answers.

But doubt can easily turn into a dark demon in our minds and hearts. We can get stuck in our doubts. Instead of being a motivating tool for deeper answers, doubt can pull us down into the pit of sadness, discouragement, bitterness and cynicism.

Ever been there? You may be there right now. Maybe you have doubted your faith and God for so long that it has been forever since you were hopeful about anything. Maybe an experience of betrayal has caused you to doubt people when they get close to you and it's hard for you to have healthy relationships. Perhaps you have been suffering so long with an illness that you doubt you will ever find relief and healing. Maybe a shattered dream has caused you to doubt new dreams. Or maybe all the pain, war and violence in the world has caused you to doubt humanity.

I get it. I certainly have gone through periods of great doubt and darkness. I know what it is like to feel stuck in the darkness of doubt. It is a very hopeless and helpless feeling. If you are there today, you are not alone.

However, I want to share with you today how I have learned to doubt my doubts and live with confidence in God. I want to share with you how you can experience

the hope and power of God again in your life. And that lesson comes from the most unlikely person in the gospels. His story appears in both Matthew and Luke. Today we are going to look at his story from Matthew. We find it in Matthew 8, beginning with verse 5. Let's take a look. It is a powerful story that just may turn your life around:

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him seeking help. –Matthew 8:5

We find Jesus at the height of his ministry. He is going to town to town teaching and healing people. Word about him is spreading like crazy. Everyone is starting to hear about this Jesus of Nazareth. So, when he enters this town of Capernaum everyone in the town finds out about it. And the first person who approaches Jesus is not a devout Jew or someone who followed Jesus, but a Roman centurion!

A Roman Centurion was a high-ranking officer in the Roman army. Only the strongest, loyal, and most disciplined men became centurions. This man had command over hundreds of men who followed every order he gave.

What I want you to know about centurions is that they were considered pagans by Jews. They worshipped other gods and did terrible things. And yet here was this centurion asking Jesus for help. What did he need help with? Let's take a look:

“Lord,” he said, “my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly.” –Matthew 8:6

The centurion had a servant. Shows you how important he was in that society. But this centurion was not like other centurions. He had compassion on his servants. Most misused and abused their servants. If servants disobeyed them or were not useful, they would kill them or sell them off to another abusive centurion. But this Centurion cared about his servant. His servant was suffering terribly, unable to move. Who knows what his malady was. All we know is that the centurion cared enough about this man that he sought help from Jesus of

Nazareth. This was a very odd move for a Roman centurion who worshipped other gods and lived a pagan lifestyle.

But I want you to notice something about what the centurion said to Jesus and what he didn't say. Notice that the centurion simply stated his problem to Jesus. He didn't make any request. He didn't cry out, "Lord you've got to do something....you've got to heal him....you've got to....." That's what most of us do isn't it? When we pray to Jesus, we make it plain what we want and what we need, don't we?

That's not what the centurion did. All he said to Jesus was, "My servant is at home suffering terribly." Why didn't he make a request? We are going to find out why in a second and the why is huge.

So how did Jesus respond to the centurion? What did Jesus do? Did he say, "Away with you wicked centurion! Away with you, you pagan violent man!" No. This was Jesus who had great love for everyone, especially outsiders. Look at Jesus' response:

Jesus said to him, "Shall I come and heal him?" – Matthew 8:7

Jesus response was, "Okay your servant is suffering....and.....what? Do you want me to come to your home and heal him? Is that what you want? Everyone tells me what they want me to do....you just stated your problem....just tell me what you want...you want me to come to your house, just tell me where you live and I will come over and heal him." Watch what happens next:

The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof." –Matthew 8:8

What? Why would the centurion seek Jesus out for help if he thought he was too unworthy for Jesus to enter his home? You see, the centurion was knowledgeable of the Jewish faith. He knew no self-respecting practicing Jew would enter the home of a pagan centurion. Their homes were unclean to Jews. Centurions were vile characters to Jews and they would not dream of entering their home. The centurion knew this and he probably thought Jesus wouldn't go near his home. But this is Jesus we are talking about and he never let rules stop him from loving and helping people.

Still, the centurion did not want Jesus to come to his house. Jesus must have found that strange and said, "So you tell me your servant is suffering but you don't want me to come to your house and heal him? Well then,

what do you want me to do exactly?" Look at what he says to Jesus. It is astounding:

Just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." –Matthew 8:8-9

Amazing! He said, "You don't need to come to my house to heal him. Just say the word. You can do it right now, right here. Just say he's healed, and he will be healed. I mean, that's how it works in my world. I command a huge army. I follow orders and many men follow my orders. If I want something done, it's done. Period. Isn't this how this works? I've heard you have great power. You can just heal him right now. Just say the word." Wow!

Now, understand, this centurion still has not made any request of Jesus. He has simply stated his problem and said to Jesus, "Just say the word." Simple, confident and clear. No begging. No bargaining. Well Jesus was wowed. Look at what Jesus said next. It is the greatest compliment Jesus ever gave anyone:

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." – Matthew 8:10

This is unbelievable. Jesus said this centurion had greater faith than all the amazing characters in the Bible – Abraham, Moses, Jacob, David, the Prophets, etc. Jesus said this centurion had greater faith than all the heroes of the Bible who did amazing things for God! That's huge! Think about it! That is a grand statement! And it wasn't as if Jesus was saying this about a devout Jew. That would have been astonishing enough. He said it about an unclean, pagan man who the Jewish leaders hated and avoided! What does that tell you? Human beings judge people by their outward appearance but God looks on the heart. And when Jesus saw this centurion's heart and heard what he said, he was so impressed, so amazed, that he basically said, "The faith of this centurion is the greatest faith I have ever seen."

Only twice in the gospels do we find Jesus amazed at anyone or anything. First, Jesus was amazed at the lack of faith of his own people. Second, we find in our text for today that Jesus was amazed at the great faith of a man who was considered an outsider.

What was it about the great faith of the centurion that amazed Jesus? What moved Jesus so much that he gave

him the greatest compliment in the world? Well, we find the answer to that in the last thing Jesus said to the centurion:

Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.” And his servant was healed at that moment. –Matthew 8:13

“Let it be done just as you believed it would.” What was it about the faith of the centurion that amazed Jesus and impressed him so much? He expected Jesus to act. “Okay, it’s done, just as you expected it to be done.” The centurion didn’t hope or wish or beg or plea or bargain or doubt when he approached Jesus that day. He simply expected Jesus to do something. He expected Jesus to respond to his problem. He expected Jesus to help. He never made a request. He never even said, “Please heal him.” He simply heard Jesus had the greatest power in the world, simply stated his problem and simply expected Jesus to respond with his power at that very moment. And Jesus did, just as the centurion expected.

So, what is the lesson for us today? What impresses the heck out of Jesus? **Jesus is moved when we expect him to act in our lives.** The key word there is expect. Jesus is impressed when we expect him to act in our lives. Sounds simple, doesn’t it? It is. Too simple for most of us. When was the last time you were so confident in God that you expected him to act in your life? Has there ever been a time you were expectant about God doing anything in your life? Do you have a problem in your life today? Do you expect God to respond to it or do you wish or hope he will? Do you have an issue in your life today that you can’t solve on your own? Do you expect God to help you solve it or do you bargain with God about it?

You see, for most of us, our faith often takes the form of wishing or bargaining with God. Some of us just wish and hope and cross our fingers to God. And some of us bargain with God, “I’ve been good, Lord....remember when I did that nice thing the other day....throw me a bone, God.” And while we are bargaining with God we forget we have a God of grace who has graciously loved us, saved us, and forgiven us. We don’t have to bargain with a gracious God.

When was the last time you expected God to act in your life? For example, when you got up, got dressed and came to worship today, were you expecting to hear or experiencing something from God that would make a

difference in your life or did you wish that the preacher wouldn’t go long today so you could beat the Baptists to Waffle House? When you read your Bible and pray, do you expect to be inspired by God? Do you expect to be moved by God? When you get up in the morning do you expect to experience God during the day? Do we as Johns Creek UMC expect God to do great things through our church or do we simply expect to pay the bills and be a religious shop?

Perhaps you are thinking, “I would love to have that kind of confidence but my doubts are so heavy and strong.” Well let me proclaim boldly today: It’s time to start doubting your doubts and expecting God to act in your life! It’s time to doubt your doubts and expecting God’s power in your life! It’s time to doubt your doubts and experience the hope of God in your life!

If you are someone struggling with doubt today, here is your homework: Pick one thing you have doubts about or are struggling with today. Just pick one thing. Give it to God and pray, “Lord, I’m expecting you to act on this. I expect it.” Just give it to God with an expectant faith and watch what happens. He may not act or answer in the way you want him to, but he will act. I promise you that!

I will give you one of the greatest examples of expectant faith in my life. Ever since I was in junior high I prayed and expected God to provide a wonderful woman for me to marry. I got started early because I knew I would be a challenge! In high school I dated a few girls. They were nice but none of them were “the one.” Then I got to college and I surely expected God to provide the right woman there. I dated a couple of strange girls and became friends with many wonderful girls but still did not find the one. I saw my buddies finding the right women and was jealous but I kept expecting God to provide. Then when I went off to seminary I definitely expected God to provide the right woman for me there. I dated couple of girls in seminary who were stranger than the ones in college! I didn’t expect some of the women in seminary to be that strange, but they were! Wow! I was disappointed but I kept expecting God to provide.

In my second year of seminary I got a job as Minister of Evangelism at Northside UMC near downtown Atlanta. One of my roles was to help new people join the church. I heard that there was a woman named Brandy working in our recreation department who was interested in joining. So, one afternoon I went to look for her in the gym. When I walked in the gym I noticed a beautiful

woman in a red dress. I found out it was Brandy. I thought, "It would be my honor and privilege to speak with her about joining the church. I'm just a humble servant and this is my job." Needless to say, there was immediate chemistry. The second time we talked we talked for over three hours. We were engaged in three months! She swept me off my feet. I often joke that Brandy wanted to join the church and when she met me she got a lot more church than she bargained for! I'm so blessed to call Brandy my wife. What a woman!

Jesus is moved when we expect him to act in our lives. When we expect the Lord to act in our lives, our confidence in him moves him and he responds.

David understood this well. That's why the Bible calls David a man "after God's own heart." David's verses throughout the Bible are filled with expectation. Take a look:

"In the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation." (Psalm 5:3 NIV)

Psalm 130:5 (TLB) says, "I wait expectantly, trusting God to help, for He has promised."

I can't guarantee that every time you give something to God expecting him to act that you'll always get what you are expecting. But I can tell you this: If you expect Jesus to act in your life, you can expect two things – Jesus will act and respond in some way and your percentage of answered prayer will increase dramatically. I have seen it in my own life as well as in the lives of others. Maybe most of all when we have an attitude of expectancy about the Lord there will be a peace and joy in our hearts that we can't find anywhere else.

Repeat this Psalm with me:

"I will keep expecting you to help me. I praise you more and more"! (Psalm 71:14 TLB)

Jesus is moved when we expect him to act in our lives.



11180 Medlock Bridge Road Johns Creek, GA 30097
770-497-8215 www.johnscreekumc.org