

“Power in Prayer”
Luke 7:1-10
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Carbondale Community UMC
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Introduction

Have you ever wondered if God really hears our prayers? We are millennia away from the incarnate Jesus who walked the earth, who performed acts of great healing and power when people prayed. Do you ever wonder if that power is still being mediated through prayer today? Does God hear us when we pray—and still perform miraculous answers to prayer?

Sometimes we need saints to help us to believe—people of faith who go before us and show us how to pray. Saints serve as examples of people who pray and trust that prayers are heard and responded to by God. If we can’t believe, perhaps someone else can believe in prayer for us—that is a saint.

Saint Centurion

A saintly character dominates the storyline of our scripture text for today—a centurion. Certainly the Israelite people wouldn’t normally consider a centurion an estimable figure. This person worked for the occupying Roman government as a leader of about one hundred military men. He was probably in the service of Herod Antipas as a leader of mercenary troops; he would have had considerable standing

and status in the community, but would have been seen as a Gentile outsider to Israelite Jews. A centurion would have been accustomed to issuing commands to those under him; as he says he says to a soldier 'Go' and he goes, and to another 'Come' and he comes. His word gets things done.

What makes this particular centurion saintly, however, is that he isn't corrupted by such power over other's lives. He genuinely cares for his community, and appears to have been drawn by Judaism; he hasn't submitted to the rites whereby a Gentile becomes a Jew, but seems to be a proselyte on the doorstep of the synagogue. In fact, he is so committed to the Jewish community that he builds them a synagogue in Capernaum. To add to his character, he is generous and compassionate. He treats his slaves well (in our own historical hindsight, we might be tempted to critique him for having a slave, and indeed any social stratification that creates an underclass of human beings is contrary to the gospel of Jesus. Yet just as we have our own encultured, socially located perceptions for which later generations will judge us, so too did these ancient peoples. At the very least, within the centurion's society, he was exemplary in his treatment of those in his service. He cared enough for his sick slave that he went to extraordinary efforts for that slave's healing.) In doing so, we might

still characterize him as saintly, with the caveat that his compassion took place within an unjust social system.

In any case, this centurion cared so much for his slave's welfare that he sent a delegation of the community's most respected and prominent Jewish citizens to intercede on the slave's behalf to Jesus. Those elders must have been persuasive of the centurion's saintly character, because Jesus goes with them to Capernaum. When the centurion catches word that Jesus is on his way with the elders, he sends another group of friends to meet Jesus. He knew enough of Jewish practices to know that to invite Jesus into his Gentile home to actually touch the slave would render the great prophet unclean and defiled. The centurion tells his friends to say to Jesus, "Just say the word, and let my slave be healed." He believes enough in this Jesus, whom he has never met, that he trusts that Jesus can heal from a distance. He has faith that Jesus' words hold power—much more power than the centurion's own as a military commander. The centurion trusts that Jesus will hear his heartfelt prayer, and do something to help his slave. He believes Jesus' word will get things (like healing) done.

Jesus' Power through Prayer

Jesus does just that. Christ offers his healing power to one who has never seen him, but who has earnestly prayed. The centurion

must have seen the slave sit up, his fever break, his energy return. Before the contingent of Jewish elders and friends even returned back to his house, the slave was healed through the power of prayer in Jesus' name. Jesus affirms the centurion's faith—a saint who trusted and believed in Jesus even more than the Jews around him.

Thus, the centurion serves as an example to us of how to believe in the power of prayer to Jesus—especially as a person who never saw, touched, or experienced Christ in person. To those of us millennia away from the incarnate Jesus, the centurion teaches that God does hear us when we pray and answers those prayers. The centurion's faith affirms to us that Jesus' power can and is still being conveyed to the church. Jesus isn't just a fond memory and a great healer about whom the Bible tells stories; Jesus is and can still be alive and active in our lives and in our church. God is not dead, as Nietzsche famously proclaimed, but present and listening to our prayer cries even now.

For some of us, praying presents challenges. We're not sure we even have the faith or capacity to say as the centurion, "Lord, only speak the word, and let me be healed." No need to worry. The church gathered here is a communion of saints to pray for you when you cannot. We sustain every week the practice of prayer to a God we believe hears and heals—even if you cannot. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his amazing book *Life Together* writes that we "pray as a fellowship.

The Body of Christ is praying, and as an individual one acknowledges that his prayer is only a minute fragment of the whole prayer of the church. He or she learns to pray the prayer of the Body of Christ.”¹

We are now going to pray prayers of the Body of Christ, trusting and believing together that God does hear us. We are going to go through a mini-school of prayer, moving in and out of a variety of different prayer practices. Through some God may speak to you, through others you may struggle. Simply be open that we are all the body of Christ praying together, believing that God does hear us in a variety of ways.

We’ll begin with a sung prayer Taize song “O Lord hear my prayer.” St. Augustine of Hippo wrote that when we sing, we pray twice. We’ll move from song into an embodied breath prayer, then into centering prayer, intercessory prayer, and the Lord’s Prayer. Through it all, may we trust that God does hear our prayer. Let us now sing. . .

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 48.