



A Gospel for All

In the gospels there are particular times when Jesus watches a person and then stops everything, stops all of the proceedings, and says to those around him: “Hey everyone—did you see what that person just did? Now *that* is what faithfulness looks like. If you want to be found faithful, follow that example.”

The widow offering two small coins and the woman breaking open the perfume to anoint Jesus are two such instances. The story in Matthew chapter 8 of the centurion whose servant is sick is another. That incident is particularly instructive to the theme for this month’s 127th Covenant Annual Meeting, which is *Found Faithful: Serving Globally*.

A centurion was an officer in the Roman army. *Centurion* comes from the same root as *century*. Century mean one hundred years; centurion means an officer in charge of one hundred soldiers.

Remember this. The Roman army was an occupying force. Israel was a conquered country, part of the Roman Empire. This was not an army that protected; it was an enemy that suppressed. Anytime there is a force whose sole purpose is to keep people in line, there is going to be resentment. The Israelites would have despised a centurion in particular because he was not just a soldier, but a soldier in charge of a force of soldiers. He was a visible reminder of conflict and control.

That is why this is such a surprising story. Not all the people we paint as the enemy are cold-hearted. This centurion cares deeply about one of his servants who lies sick and near death. Roman soldiers didn’t need to care about their Jewish servants. They were like a commodity, easily replaced. But this centurion does care. He implores Jesus to heal his servant. In fact, his faith is so strong that he says, “Jesus, you don’t even need to come to the house. Just say the word, and I know he will be healed.”

And what does Jesus do? He stops everything and commends the man to everyone gathered by saying, “Truly I tell you I have not found anyone *in Israel* with such great faith.”

Jesus is making a statement that the gospel is not for a select group of people, but for anyone, and he uses an enemy soldier to make the point.

Just so people won’t miss it he goes on to say, “Many will come from east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.”

Yes, Jesus is pointing out the extraordinary nature of the faith of the centurion—that he believes the word of Jesus alone is enough to heal the servant—but the bigger message is that Jesus uses an enemy of the people to illustrate that faith is not the privilege of a few, but the opportunity of all. At the feast will be people not from one place, not from one people, but from people drawn together from east and west, north and south.

Jesus lived in complex cultural currents. He spent part of his childhood in Egypt, was raised in a Jewish home, lived in a Roman empire, ministered to a Syro-Phoenician woman, and his cross was carried by Simon of Cyrene, a city in northern Africa. He was fluent in Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. The incarnation is literally impossible without a woman, the cross is witnessed by women, and the resurrection is first announced by women, all of this in a culture where women were marginalized. He used a hated Samaritan as the star of his most famous story, and here he uses an enemy soldier as an object lesson for faith. He moved among the poorest of the poor and the richest of the rich. He disappointed every single political persuasion from the radical Zealots to the conservative Herodians. The Roman leaders didn’t know what to do with him and the religious leaders wanted to get rid of him. The people who hate Jesus the most hate him for not hating the things they hate. At every point Jesus moves among those who otherwise sneer at each other to let them know God does not. He calls us to do the same in taking his unconditional love to all.

That conviction is what led early Covenanters to rally resources to send missionaries to China and Alaska. From that seed we are now engaged in partnerships in thirty-eight countries on five continents.

Because of that, this Annual Meeting will be a foretaste of the feast to come. But more so, it is also a call to the task yet given. May we indeed be found faithful as we serve globally. ■

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