

Sermon

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Luke 7:1-17 (healing of centurion's slave & resurrection of widow's son)

Healing, from Every Angle

May the words spoken, and the words received, be only in your service, great God of Love. Amen.

Some scholars refer to Luke a “Gospel of Women”¹ because women play such an important role in the salvation story of Jesus, from Mary’s visit by the angel Gabriel to the women at the tomb who first witness the resurrection.

My attention from today’s scripture goes to the story of Jesus raising the widow’s son. This is a Jesus who cares about and prioritizes women. And he didn’t heal *any* son of *any* woman in this story, but the only son of a widow, the most vulnerable kind of woman there was in his world. She was already without a husband to provide for her well-being in a strictly patriarchal society. With the death of her son, she was now without the only other person who could provide for and protect her. She was utterly alone and destitute.

Jesus knew that to touch anything related to death—the body, the bier—would make him ritually unclean, unable to be present in the worshiping community or even enter the temple for seven days.² And yet, he was more concerned about alleviating the widow’s suffering and restoring her safety than he was with personal implications of impurity.

Jesus restored the widow’s son to life, and the mother had a joyful reunion with her child. *He* was healed from death. *She*, from poverty and grief. Through this story, I myself am healed in the face of ongoing, deadening patriarchy, knowing that Jesus’ compassion is intended for me, a woman, even at my most vulnerable. Jesus intends to bring life out of my deepest grief so that I may know joy.

If I’m being honest, I’m most like the centurion in our scripture story. Of all the characters, the centurion has the most power and prestige. He’s a Roman citizen, a soldier with 100 under his command, one of the elites within a legion of the Roman army. I may not command soldiers, but as a white man I do command some of the highest respect and deference in my culture.

But my status and privileged access to wealth and power, can’t keep me safe from suffering. Even *I* have need of Jesus. There are places in my life that need healing, and sometimes I don’t feel worthy to ask.

This story tells me that I can go to Jesus in faith, and he will have compassion and respond. His care extends to everyone.

I love that the two of these stories are put side-by-side in the Bible: the centurion and the healing of the widow’s son. Luke has this affinity for those who are oppressed.

¹ Catherine Clark Kroeger, “Luke,” *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Catherine Clark Kroeger & Mary J. Evans (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

² Kroeger.

The centurion's servant (or slave in other translations) was a commodity in the commander's household, but he was more than that to Jesus. Not only was he someone Jesus wanted to heal, but he played an important role in the centurion knowing his need of Jesus. Jesus, as a poor Jew, was a nobody in relation to the Roman soldier but, in the end, Jesus had more power than the centurion.

As a person of color, I'm granted less power and respect in our society. White folk have treated my people as a commodity for centuries, and they can ignore us and still succeed in society. But they do that at their peril. We have what they need to help them know their need of and experience the healing God's beloved community.

And then there's the widow. Jesus set her free from the captivity of economic and social oppression of her son's death, just like God set the Israelites free from bondage in Egypt. And did you notice that she didn't have to ask? Jesus saw her need, and he responded. Jesus always sees the need of the oppressed and responds.

Did you know that when the narrator is telling about the centurion coming to Jesus to seek healing for his servant the Greek word used is *doulos*, but when the centurion speaks for himself, he uses the Greek word *pais* (*p̄is*)? *Doulos* is a word best translated as slave or servant. The word *pais* can mean servant, but in other contexts it can also be translated as the younger partner in a homosexual relationship.³

Do you know what this means?

As a queer person, I've experienced the Bible used as a weapon, the 200ths of 1 % of verses in the whole of scripture being used to exclude me, revile me, and use me as a pawn in culture wars. This is true even though Jesus never once condemns same-sex relationships.

The story about the centurion's *pais* gives me a window into Jesus' feelings about the same-sex relationships that would have been a part of the culture around him. He heard the centurion's cry for healing for the man whom he loved, and with compassion Jesus restored the centurion's *pais* back to health. If Jesus did this for the centurion's *pais*, surely he acknowledges and desires health for my own gay relationships.

Fernando Segovia is postcolonial theologian, one among a growing many of those on the margins of Eurocentric, male biblical criticism who insist that their voices be heard. They're also challenging the notion that biblical interpretation is objective, universal, value-free, and something separate from cultural and political realities. He writes, "Ethnic and racial minorities insist on reading with their own eyes and making their own voices heard, while challenging their colleagues in the West to do the same in an explicit and public fashion. . . . There is no universal reader. All reading is ideological to the core."⁴

Segovia and others on the margins of dominant culture help all of understand that each of us reads the Bible through our own lens. Just as the writers of scripture brought their own understanding of God to the page, as readers, what we notice and how we understand what we read is based on who we are and what we bring to our reading. There is no single and objective way to interpret scripture.

This makes biblical interpretation complex, and can even sound heretical, especially for those of us who grow up with the myth of universalism (and those who were white western folk who had named themselves as the norm and universal standard. However, the gift is that God

³ <https://www.gaychristian101.com/Centurion-And-Pais.html>

⁴ Segovia, 167.

speaks to many of us through the same text, and that our perspectives about what God is up to in the world is broadened as we listen to many voices and many interpretations. This doesn't mean that truth in interpretation is "willy nilly, anything goes." Rather, we read with the Holy Spirit, listening to her guidance. And this is where the importance of a "plumb line" that we talked about a couple of weeks ago comes in. This is the essential nature of God which we use to measure and judge that which we read.

In our scripture this morning, we heard two healing stories. Healing was central to Jesus' ministry, according to the Gospel of Luke. But what was in need of healing, and how did Jesus respond? Different eyes will see and understand this differently. How do you hear the story of healing?

Sometimes our understanding of healing is confirmed by how others read the stories of Jesus. But sometimes, our understanding will be challenged by others. Yet, it may be exactly in that gift of challenge that we are healed in places we did not even realize we carried a wound.

We are called to listen—curiously, humbly—for the still speaking God. We may find it where we did not know to look or with words we did not care to hear. And yet, in God's immeasurable compassion, we can be healed.

Amen.