

16 February 2020

What If Truth Is a Person?

Matthew 7:1-10

Our reading today comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 7, verses 1-10:

7 After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. 2A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. 3When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. 4When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, 'He is worthy of having you do this for him, 5for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.' 6And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, 'Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; 7therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. 8For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go", and he goes, and to another, "Come", and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this", and the slave does it.' 9When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.' 10When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

Let's start by just working through this story. A Roman centurion – that is, an officer of the occupying enemy imperialist army – sends a few Jewish elders to ask Jesus if he would heal a beloved slave who is near death from illness. The Jewish elders do so, encouraging Jesus to overlook the fact that the man is an enemy because this Roman is actually a good Roman. He's been generous to the Jewish people, even paid for their new synagogue, so even though naturally you would never help a Roman, this one "is worthy of having you do this for him." Jesus goes with them, but before they get to the Roman's house, the centurion sends other messengers to say to Jesus: "I'm not worthy that you should enter my house, but if you would just say the word, I believe you can heal my slave. I'm a man of authority myself," the centurion adds, "and I recognize authority in you." Jesus looks around at the crowd that was following him and says, "Now *that's* what I'm talking about! That's what faith looks like! Better than any faith I've seen in Israel, anyway." Immediately, the slave recovers.

Now there are several different directions we could take this story. For instance, we could look at the whole Jew/Gentile thing and note that Christ's mercy is available to anyone who has faith, not just to the Chosen People or to any group that considers itself a chosen people. That was surely in the mind of Luke when he included this story, inasmuch as Luke was himself a Gentile and had spent years traveling with Paul preaching Christ to Gentiles. But we could also look at the interplay of worthy and unworthy in the story. The elders had stressed that this particular Roman could be granted a boon, because he was worthy. Worthiness to them, apparently, had to do with having been generous to their church. But the centurion himself doesn't claim to deserve a thing. He explicitly tells Jesus that he's *unworthy*, but asks for mercy for his servant anyway. What he's asking for is called grace. We don't earn Christ's mercy. We

can't. But we have it anyway. But I want to look at this passage from a third perspective. Jesus says that this centurion has exemplary faith. But what did he have faith in? It wasn't faith in the Torah or the Jewish teaching. For all know, he's a faithful worshiper of the Roman gods, and the reason he'd subsidized the local synagogue was to win hearts and minds among the conquered people. We have no idea what he believed; all we know is that he trusted Jesus. He believed that Jesus *could* heal his dying slave, and he believed that, if asked, he might do so, even at the request of an enemy. The faith that so impressed Jesus is the centurion's personal faith in *him*.

In last week's sermon, I talked about the unconscious assumption that most of us make that the essence of Christianity is *what we believe*. It's our doctrine – our essential teaching – that defines us. Now this is not a new notion. People have been trying to summarize our essential teaching from the earliest days of the Church. Paul did it in 1 Corinthians 15, and the Apostles' Creed was written just a couple of generations later. But, as I said last week, ever since the Enlightenment – the Age of Reason – we have thrown *all* our emphasis on our teaching – on statements and propositions – as the source of our truth. When we talk about “the Christian faith,” we don't usually mean what we do or the way we live. We mean the defining doctrines of our group. We've put all our emphasis on *understanding* Christianity.

But that isn't Christianity. Christianity is not faith in a set of statements about God; Christianity is faith in a person, Jesus Christ. We see that clearly in our story from Luke 7, but it is just as clear throughout Jesus' life and ministry and teaching. He doesn't call his disciples to come and hear his ideas; he says, “Come, follow me.” And when he does teach, only a tiny percentage of what he says has anything to do with doctrine. His teaching is all about how to live like him, not what to think about him. The Gospel of John, which of all the four gospels is most concerned with the nature of faith, talks about several steps toward faith, but for John true faith is “abiding in him.” Our faith is about a person. We don't believe in a what; we believe in a who.

This sounds good, but if we take it seriously, it should dramatically change the way we approach the notion of truth. I hinted at this new mindset last week, when I closed the sermon with these two questions. First, what does the word “true” mean in the sentence, “That is a true statement”? We agreed it meant something like verifiable or accurate or provable. Then I asked, what does “true” mean in the sentence, “She is a true friend”? That led to more discussion, but we settled on things like trustworthy, loyal, accepting, always there for you, and especially faithful. We also agreed that true friends are better than true statements. Let me build on that today. What does it mean for us if we conceive of truth as residing in a person rather than in a list of propositions?

First, it means that “truth” is beyond our full understanding. Persons are simply more complicated than concepts. We might, after years of study, claim that we fully understand algebra or organic chemistry or music theory or Akkadian grammar, but it doesn't matter how many years of study we put into it, if we say that we completely understand our best friend or our spouse, we're fooling ourselves. We don't even understand *ourselves* perfectly, let alone other people. Well, if that's true for us – presumably simpler beings than God – how dare we ever claim to fully understand Christ. In fact, I think this why we have been so eager to reduce our

faith to a list of doctrinal statements; we can pretend that we're experts at that stuff. But if our faith is a person, we'll never master it. A little humility might be in order.

Second, if truth is a person, then *our* truth will never be exactly the same as someone else's, because no two relationships are the same. Ten different people may have relationships with one person – call him George – but to none of those people is George exactly the same as he is to any of the others, because they've had different experiences with George, known George for different lengths of time, and so on. Now, in most cases, all ten of George's friends would recognize him in each other's descriptions, but even that's not certain. The work colleague who knows the focused, hard-driving, competent George at the office might not recognize the fun-loving, longsuffering Cleveland Browns fan that George's college buddy knows. The two Georges don't seem the same person at all. So here's my question: in a case like that, which one of George's friends is right? Both, of course. But neither is completely so. They could both stand to get to know George a little better. That's what it's like when our truth is a person. I can spend my whole life seeking to know Jesus better – to abide in him – but the Jesus I know will still be different from the Jesus that someone else knows, maybe even dramatically different. To argue about which one of us is right is as pointless as arguing about who is the real George. In the end, we could both stand to get to know Jesus better. Again, some humility is necessary here. The fact is, other people know Jesus differently than I do, many of them better. Some of them may know him by other names.

Fortunately, we *can* get to know him better, because truth that is a person is a truth that continues to grow, as we ourselves continue to grow. Let me ask everyone here who has been married to the same person for at least twenty years to raise your hands. Excellent. And first of all, well done. Now, is your spouse exactly the same person you married those decades ago? And is the person whom your spouse married the same as they were back then? Huh. So what happened? You changed. Some of the changes were good and some were not, but either way, your relationship grew as you adapted to each other. A similar thing happens with Christ. Christ himself doesn't change – but as we grow, our relationship with Christ expands. In the Narnia stories, there's a scene where one of the children encounters the Christ-figure, Aslan, after many years. The child says, "You're bigger, Aslan," and Aslan replies, "That's because you've grown." The truth of our faith is like that. Because our truth is a person, it is not a static truth, but is always growing.

And finally, the truth that is centered in a person is a truth that will endure – precisely *because* that truth grows with us. We might outgrow certain propositional truths, but we can't outgrow Jesus. Let me close with a quotation from Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh – one of those people who knows Jesus better than I do:

As we continue to practice and touch reality, our beliefs change. We needn't be afraid of this. In the course of our study and practice, as we touch reality more and more deeply, our beliefs naturally evolve and become more solid. When our beliefs are based on our own direct experience of reality and not on notions offered by others, no one can remove those beliefs from us. Making a long-term commitment to a concept is much more dangerous. If ten years pass without the growth of our belief, one day we will wake up and discover that we can no longer

believe what we did. The notion of ten years ago is no longer sound or adequate, and we are plunged into the darkness of disbelief. Our faith must be alive. It cannot be just a set of rigid beliefs and notions. Our faith must evolve every day and bring us joy, peace, freedom, and love.

A final word: I've said that our truth is a person, not a statement, and I believe that. But please don't think that means that doctrinal statements don't matter at all. One doctrine, at least, I believe is essential, and it's the same one that Paul settled on in 1 Corinthians 15: the Resurrection. Jesus rose. He is alive. If that's not true, nothing I've said here today makes any sense. If he was just a wise Jewish teacher who, unfortunately, died 2,000 years ago, we can't have a relationship with him. If he's dead, all we've got are statements. Because he rose, though, we have a greater truth than that, greater than we've ever imagined.