

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Dear Sabbatarians,

This is your lucky day! Today you get three pericope studies for the price of one. This year's lectionary jumps right over Proper 4 and 5 to Proper 6 for next week. The first two are studies by Mike Hoy and the third is by Betty Krafft.

Peace and Joy,

Robin

WHAT MAKES FAITH REMARKABLE

Luke 7:1-10

Second Sunday after Pentecost

**(Sunday Between May 29 and June 4
Inclusive)**

analysis by Mike Hoy

1After 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 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.

DIAGNOSIS: "I am not worthy..."

Step 1-Initial Diagnosis: Obligated

One of the elements that sort of jumps out of us in this text is that at no place in this telling of the story do the centurion and Jesus actually meet. In the account in the gospel of Matthew (8:5-13) and the parallel in the gospel of John (4:46-53), there is a direct encounter. This story, however, is built on the encounters between embassies sent out to meet Jesus. And the first group of embassies, the "Jewish elders," are intended to be an impressive bunch. Whatever else one might surmise about the centurion, he obviously had connections that ran deep into the Jewish community. They "owed" him one; to him they were obliged or bound (Latin, obligare: to bind). That is, in essence, a relationship of reciprocity. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. For the most part the world has been operating on that kind of system for some time. There is value, even capital, in actions that are undertaken for others that can be redeemed at a later time.

Step 2-Advanced Diagnosis: "Worthy" as unfaith

One of the problems with reciprocity, however, is that it carries its own built-in value-system. The sense of obligation carries its own sense of worth. The first embassies convey this message of worthiness in coming to Jesus: "he is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people; and it is he who built our synagogue." Fact is, there is nothing

inherently wrong on the surface with this remark, any more than understanding that there is value in the system of reciprocity (which has its real origins in divine, left-hand functions). But it does lure people into a false sense of their worth. The value-system of these embassies bases worthiness of one's deeds. That is a precarious, even unfaithful, foundation.

Step 3—Final Diagnosis: Owing

Perhaps the most problematic message from this story is that God might in fact take this false sense of our worthiness seriously. Jesus does, after all, go with the embassy. But can our sense of worthiness really stand all that much scrutiny? In the final analysis, when all the cards of reciprocity are played out, will the centurion (or any of us, for that matter) really have more “owed” or more “owing”—to God? Will he and we have debts that cannot be repaid? There is, I suppose, one way to find out. God is on the doorstep. But that may not be to our advantage.

PROGNOSIS: “... but only speak the Word”

Step 4—Initial Prognosis: Authoritative Re-valuing

On the other hand, we should consider just who this Embassy of God is that comes to us. All in this story recognize that Jesus carries divine authority—but how Jesus uses that authority is what makes all the difference in the world. Jesus does not use that authority in the system of reciprocity—at least not directly with us, making us pay for our own indebtedness. He does allow himself, however, to become absorbed in that system of reciprocity in order to overcome it, to antiquate it. People are re-valued by Jesus' taking their sins upon himself on the cross, such that they are not valued by what they owe but by Who is now their new Owner, Jesus the Christ. That new style of valuing is most certainly to our advantage, because now our sense of being justified is not dependent upon our good deeds but on the merit of Christ, who covers us with wall-to-wall

worthiness.

Step 5—Advanced Prognosis: Remarkable faith

How we grasp that worthiness is not by pointing to ourselves, but by our trusting that Jesus' authority is "enough." The centurion's second embassy group, comprised of his "friends" who know best his heart, convey the centurion's message, "I am not worthy to have you come under my roof." Nor does the centurion "presume" anything about being acceptable on his own merits. Instead, he recognizes that Jesus outranks him, and this gladly; for in this faithful recognition is the healing of the heart of the centurion and ourselves from all the pitfalls and dangers of self-righteous living and worldly reciprocity. The story of this faith-filled living is reflected also in the Roman Catholic liturgy just prior to the Eucharist: "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you; but only say the word and I shall be healed." Then we are nourished at the Lord's table. Our source of being finds its fullness in the healing power of Jesus's Word that he is our authority-enough. And what is more, Jesus looks upon that faith, and commends it as truly remarkable: "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."

Step 6—Final Prognosis: Following orders

In addition to the centurion, the slave who is healed does not directly encounter Jesus—but he does have dealings with the faithful centurion. In fact, as in other stories in the gospels, it is the faith of the centurion that actually heals not only himself but the slave—that much Jesus does grant to the power of faith. This is, to be sure, because the faith finds its power source in Jesus. But it is, nonetheless, "our faith" which is "the victory that conquers the world" (1 John 5:4). And living by faith is taking our lead from the path our Captain, Jesus, has trod for the healing of the world.

THE CROSSING OF LIFE OVER DEATH

Luke 7:11-17

(Sunday Between June 5 and June 11 Inclusive)

11Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. 12As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was large crowd from the town. 13When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." 14Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" 15The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. 16Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" 17This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

DIAGNOSIS: Death's Passing

Step 1-Initial Diagnosis: Without Support

This account is a crossing of two processions: one a funeral procession, heading out of the city of Nain; the other a procession of Jesus and his disciples headed into the city. The encounter between Jesus and the widow is the focus of the story. While the widow is joined by a whole group of mourners, the widow has more to mourn than the loss of a loved one. Her son was her only means of support, the only means for her having a living (as meager as it may have already been). The emotional support of the crowds is not enough to compensate for the very

real depth of loss that she has experienced; but perhaps their going with her, along her procession, is a symbol of the very real threat that could happen to all of us—to be without. Many in our world are already living that way, some because we have made it that way. But all of this very concrete level of being “without” is more than simply emotional or economical—it is a reminder of our own impending death, even theologically. How much does the crowd share in the widow’s misfortune?

Step 2—Advanced Diagnosis: Denial (and fear)

Denial is often on the surface of our encounter with such tragedy, but fear is not far from the surface. Psychologist Ernest Becker claimed that the “fear of death” is, in fact, the motivating factor of all human beings; but he also notes how that our egoistic efforts toward success seek to deny death its due. In other words, our more acceptable worldly practices of denial (even in ceremonial mourning) thinly cover our fear—even though fear may be closer to the truth of where we are at in this procession, and what is really weighing on our hearts.

Step 3—Final Diagnosis: Carried Out

One thing is for certain, all will eventually face the deadly fate and be “carried out.” No amount of stoic heroism or denial can alter the consequences of death’s impending procession toward us. But the largest consequence may be the fact that our fear of death is grounded in our relationship with God. St. Paul calls death “the last enemy” (1 Corinthians 15:26). But Paul understood that the real sting of death is that it is God’s carrying us out—like the garbage—because of our sinful, egoistic denial of our relationship with him. And the death-bearers, as Luther rightly pointed out, are the instruments of God’s Law.

PROGNOSIS: Life’s Crossing

Step 4—Initial Prognosis: Carried In/With/By Christ

Death would be too much to face alone, or even with supporting

crowds. But what makes the procession unique in this story is that Christ is involved in death's crossing. He is involved, first, by his deeply shared sense of compassion (anyone can appreciate the gutsy-depth of the Greek word for "compassion," *splagchna*). Secondly, Jesus risks contamination with death itself, "touching the bier." Christ is deeply in the world, and into its deadly consequences. But that isn't the whole of the Crossing. In his contamination with death, death itself—indeed, even the divine judgment in death—"stands still." The reversal of death's deadly disease is furthered by Christ's command, "I say to you, rise!" This victory of new life, even though fully unfolded later in the gospel story, intersects this moment so that death is swallowed up in Jesus's death, and overcome in his resurrection, here and now, for the widow, her son, and all with Jesus.

Step 5—Advanced Prognosis: Favored

Fear seizes the crowd; but not fear that is immobilizing. Now the fear can be faced head on, because there is joy to celebrate: "God has looked favorably on his people!" The new status we get to enjoy is the status of being favored—not yesterday's news (as in the obituaries), but God's greatest, good news of those who are rescued from a one-way ticket to death. Faith crosses through death and its consequences, grasping that we are regarded as favored darlings in the kingdom of our Lord.

Step 6—Final Prognosis: Giving Support

So favored is this hope that the good news cannot be restrained, "spreading throughout Judea and all the surrounding country." But what is also noticeable in this story is how Jesus, upon raising the young man from death, "gave him to his mother." The compassionate love of God in Christ finds roots deeply in our world by our facing the deadly consequences in concrete means of supporting the world. We, who have crossed with Christ from

death into life in our baptisms, are given back into the world to be instruments of the favor that God brings. So favored is this hope that the good news cannot be restrained, “spreading throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.”

CHANGING OUTSIDERS INTO INSIDERS

Luke 7:36-8:3

(Proper 6—Sunday Between June 12 and June 18 Inclusive)

37One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. 37And a women in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house brought an alabaster jar of ointment. 38She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. 39Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner.” 40Jesus spoke and said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” “Teacher”, he replied, “Speak.” 41“A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?” 43Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.” And Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly.” 44Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. 45You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. 46You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet

with ointment. 47Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." 48Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" 50And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." [8:]1Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, 2as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities; Mary called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, 3and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

DIAGNOSIS: On the Outside

Step 1—Initial Diagnosis: Judging Sinners

This story has a message for all people, whether they are inside or outside of religious institutions. Those inside give every indication of living according to God's will. In this account, the insider is Simon the Pharisee. (He could just as well be Simon the "good Christian person.") Simon regards himself as blessed by God, materially and spiritually. He feels no shame in welcoming Jesus into his home for dinner, together with other guests among the religious elite. The outsider is the woman, who certainly demonstrates courage in entering the home of Simon; but her courage wanes (perhaps because of the rudeness of Simon and his "inside" guests) and she breaks into tears. From Simon's "inside" view, the woman is judged a sinner. Is he wrong? No. But his viewpoint is limited; it can only see the sin of those who are on the outside. This is also true of judgments today by insiders on outsiders who have "made a mess of their lives"—the addicted, criminals, prostitutes. As a result, the religious elite turn their homes (synagogues, churches) into an "insiders-

only” club.

Step 2–Advanced Diagnosis: Offended

Insiders and outsiders can find ample reasons to be offended with each other. Insiders may say that they welcome sinners, but the appearance of a “real sinner” like this woman would most likely give offense. By the same token, outsiders may judge the “hypocrites” within religious institutions and not want to have anything to do with them. The relationships between God’s creatures are broken; but more importantly, their hearts have picket-fences. They “love little.” Furthermore, the offense is compounded by the obvious friendship that Jesus exemplifies with both parties.

Step 3–Final Diagnosis: Outsiders All

Jesus, however, levels the playing field. The insider Simon and the outsider woman are both indebted (by their sin) before God. The woman had ample reason to know the depth of her debt. Simon, on the other hand, had to be made aware of his debt. He thought he was “correct” in his actions toward Jesus, but he neglected basic hospitality to this stranger. Furthermore, Jesus points out how Simon neglected his hospitality toward Jesus (no water, no kiss, no anointing). Nevertheless, neither the person with the large debt nor the person with the small debt has the ability to repay the damages. Ultimately, the amount of debt is irrelevant. The problem is none of us are ultimately “insiders,” because all of us are on the outs with the divine creditor.

PROGNOSIS: On the Inside Track

Step 4–Initial Prognosis: Forgiven Debtors

What gave the woman courage (faith?) to come to Jesus in the first place, however, is already a sign that there is something different about the divine reckoning that takes place in the person of Jesus. What if Jesus desires to be in the company of the self-convicted “outsiders as well as the inhospitable (and

hypocritical) so-called “insiders” (who are also, by divine critical judgment, outsiders also)? What if it’s really true that the creditor, God, cancels the debts of all? That’s what Jesus conveys here. For that kind of cancellation of debts, there is a payment, to be sure. But Jesus is willing to cover that cost in his cross.

Step 5–Advanced Prognosis: Accepted

The woman, then, serves as a model of faithful trust for Simon and for all of us, for we all are former outsiders now with a solid hope of being accepted by God. She trusted that Jesus would not turn her away. Even her tears become more than her sense of shame for her sin; they are her confession of faith as well, her veneration of her Lord! The hope for us all is secured in the words of Jesus, “your sins are forgiven.” “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Step 6–Final Prognosis: Going in Peace

Outsiders (now insiders) are given a new lease on life, a debt-free life. They are reconnected to one and all, rooted in the forgiveness and peace they have (by faith) in Jesus. Jesus tells the woman to go in peace. But where to go? Into the cities and villages to proclaim the good news. To find other outsiders and bring the word of forgiveness and great connections. Hospitality and welcoming peace are not in short demand.