

Where do you find faith? If someone came to you tomorrow and asked where they could find faith, what would you say to them? Where do we find faith? Researcher, John Finney, in his book, Finding Faith, writes: “The answer may be in the fact that so many come to faith through a relationship with a relative, friend or pastor.” – We find faith in one another!

In our text today we discover the faith of a Roman Centurion. He is a man of power in his local community. A Centurion is the most often referred to Roman soldier in the New Testament. He would have been the commander of a group of one hundred soldiers and would have the highest non-commissioned officer rank. He is the first Gentile to approach Jesus in Luke’s Gospel.

Luke gives us a little of his background: He has heard about Jesus and he sends some of the Jewish elders to go and get Jesus and bring him back to heal his beloved servant. He has made his way into the hearts of the people by building them a synagogue for worship. (Maybe this is a lesson we all could learn. It would be like our building a mosque for worship in an Islamic community.) He is deeply concerned not only for his servant but for those in the community.

Jesus has agreed to come to his home and as they are approaching the centurion sends some of his friends to meet them (from the text he may not have been present at all in the encounter). In a genuine expression of humbleness he says that he is not worthy to have Jesus come to his home (I wonder if he is trying to protect Jesus from entering the home of a Gentile and causing more grief to his ministry? Even his lack of presence may be to protect Jesus from the criticism of the crowd). He acknowledges Jesus’ power over sickness and the power of the Word, “*But say the word and my servant will be healed*” (7:7b NIV). He has heard the stories of Jesus. He knows what is going on in his region and he has no other hope for his servant. He sees more in Jesus than those around him. Humbly he seeks Jesus intervention.

He knows the power of the word. He is a Roman Centurion. He is used to taking and giving orders. His word has power. He speaks with the authority of Rome. He commands and men and women are required to obey. Yet, he understands he is in the presence of one whose word commands even greater power than his. If Jesus just says the Word, his servant will be healed. There is no need to bring Jesus into his home. There is no need of a confrontation.

Jesus responds to the faith of the Centurion by the statement: “*I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel*” (7:9b NIV). Can you imagine the response to those who are with Jesus? The response of these Jewish elders? Here are those who thought they had faith. Here are those who claimed the privilege of faith and status as the Chosen of God. These are the ones who say they know God. These are those who claim to be on personal terms with God. These are those who taught that Gentiles were literally good for nothing. And yet, Jesus says that in this Gentile he has found a faith greater than Israel.

I wonder where the Centurion found his faith? I see several clues. The first is that he was seeking and searching for faith. As I look at the story I see a man who

has helped a community to build a synagogue, a place to worship their God. He has seen in these people a faith and a hope that goes beyond his. What is the faith of these people? Even the Romans respected it. In other regions they made those they captured adopt the gods of the Romans. But here in Israel they allowed the Jews to keep their God. Here is a faith that one needs to investigate.

The second is his openness to the impossible. All Jesus needs to do is speak a word and his servant will be healed. (Don't you wish your doctor could do that? You would not even have to visit and wait in his/her office!). Here a Roman soldier, a Gentile, believes in the impossible power of the Word.

But the third, for me the most important, is he has built a relationship with the Jewish community. They have become "friends." Or, at least they are respectful enough of him and what he has done in community that they are willing to go to Jesus on his behalf. They certainly see him as one who is worthy of their help.

I wonder if we grasp how strange this story really is? Here we have a group of Jewish elders coming to a young rabbi at the request of a Gentile. This was not a normal, every day activity. Why would a Jewish elder come to the aid of a Roman Centurion, a gentile? Is there more here than meets our first reading of the text? Could it be they are willing to go to Jesus because of the relationships that have formed between these elders and this Centurion over the years? They have found a mutual respect for one another. They have become friends.

Simply put, relationship building is a way to share faith – to find faith. The building of friendships is one of the most important aspects of our faith. My favorite definition of evangelism is, "One beggar telling another beggar where they found bread." All we need to do is change the word "beggar" to "friend". Evangelism is one friend telling another friend where they found faith." This episode in Luke's Gospels demonstrates for us one of the greatest tools of evangelism – friendships.

John Finney asks this question in his book:

"If 'friendship evangelism' is one of the most natural and effective means of evangelism, are too many churches so over-busy with their own internal life that their members do not even have time enough to look after their own families, let alone love their neighbors? Friendship needs time. Every Christian needs to examine the right relationship between time given to the life of the church and that given to family and friends."

Jesus came as a "friend" to the world – Can we afford to be any less? He has given us the example. This Table is an example of his love and friendship. As we come might we re-commit our lives to being friends.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989
NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1989
Finney, John, Finding Faith, How Does it Happen?, British Bible Society, England, 1992