

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

PETER J. VIBERT, PASTOR

MARCH 29, 2009



For more sermons go to www.wrconchurch.org

Luke 7:1-23

"Are You the One?"

"Are you the one?" John the Baptist, who has been imprisoned at the whim of Herod Antipas for months, sends the question to Jesus. John has not seen the many people Jesus has healed, he has not seen the crowds that follow him. But why does John ask this question? You could take it as doubt that has afflicted even a man as spiritually gifted as John while he is in prison. The most faithful of people sometimes find their faith wavering when they face serious troubles. John, after all, will not see the light of day again, but will be executed at the demand of Herod's wife and step-daughter.

But the tone of Luke's narrative, and the tone of John's question, suggest that something other than loss of faith is affecting John. *"Are you the one?"* sounds more like the question of a man who is disappointed in what he is hearing about Jesus. John's expectations have not been met. He had prophesied that *"one more powerful than I will come,"* who will purge God's people, *"baptize them with fire."* Where is the judgment that John expects? Jesus seems only to be concerned with healing and teaching. Where's the fire and brimstone? Doesn't God's Messiah bring judgment on the wicked?

John's question comes in a context where Jesus has just expanded his "healing ministry" in two dramatic though very different ways: to the servant of a Roman

centurion, and to a widow whose only son has just died.

1) *The Centurion's Servant*

Jesus has returned to his "second home," the lakeside village of Capernaum. A delegation of synagogue elders approaches him about a centurion who has been good to the village, and who even helped finance construction of the synagogue. He is *"a good man... and he is worthy of your attention."* This is the traditional code of flattery, patronage, honor and shame at work. The elders believe that Jesus will be persuaded by the man's credentials and agree to help him.

But as we have come to expect, Jesus confounds their traditions by agreeing immediately to go the house of a Gentile, a Roman soldier. Centurions are usually well spoken of in the gospels. They were professional soldiers who had "risen through the ranks" to a junior officer position – in our terms an NCO; a Staff Sergeant perhaps. A centurion was not like a tribune, a member of the higher orders of Roman society – an "equestrian" – but more likely a native of one of Rome's occupied provinces (though not a Jew – they were exempt from serving in the Roman army). A centurion might earn Roman citizenship as a reward for good service.

Here in Galilee the centurion is "Caesar's man" in the village – even if he is nominally

working for Herod Antipas – but this man has taken his charge seriously and knows the local culture. So when he hears that Jesus has decided to come to his house to heal his servant, he suddenly realizes a crisis is coming. Jesus cannot enter a Gentile's house without becoming defiled, and a great row will erupt in the village, aimed at him and at Jesus. So the centurion sends more messengers, who say to Jesus "Don't come – I am unworthy that you should enter my house."

But then he adds something else: *"I am a man under authority, who also has soldiers and servants who answer to me."* He knows a lot about Jesus: *"Just say the word and my servant will be healed."* You don't have to come here. Sickness will obey you as soldiers obey me. You have the authority, and I trust you to use it. And even Jesus, for the only time recorded in the Gospels, is *amazed!* Nowhere has he encountered this depth of faith; this understanding of who he is and what his authority is. And in a *Gentile!* Not among the leaders of Israel, not among the poor who were crowding round him. Here in a Roman soldier!

Some people perhaps remember that in his "manifesto sermon" in Nazareth, Jesus reminded people that Naaman the Syrian had been "healed at a distance" by Elijah the prophet. Suddenly the prophecy of old Simeon in the temple 30 years ago begins to be fulfilled: Jesus will be *"a light to the Gentiles."*

2) The Widow of Nain

The scene shifts up into the hill country to the village of Nain. Crowds of people now follow Jesus wherever he goes. But at the entrance to Nain they meet another crowd going the opposite way: a funeral procession for a young man. The focus of the story is his mother. She is a widow, and has just lost her

only means of support and status. She is weeping, probably more loudly than any of the mourners. And without her saying a word, *"Jesus' heart goes out to her."* *"Stop crying,"* he says.

He then does an unthinkable thing – he approaches and touches the bier on which the dead body is being carried. The bearers stop. Has he forgotten that contact with a corpse makes him "unclean"? But Jesus simply says to the corpse, washed, anointed, wrapped in cloth, about to be buried, *"Young man, get up!"* And he does. And Jesus *"gives him back to his mother."* No fuss, no faith, no speeches, no long prayers. Just "get up," and he does. Jesus now not only heals lepers, casts out evil spirits, restores the sick, makes the lame walk, but he can raise the dead!

Now the people are amazed, and they decide that Jesus the healer is in fact *"a great prophet."* They remembered the great prophets of the past – had not both Elijah and Elisha raised people from the dead (including a widow's son)? Some now go so far as to say *"God has come to help his people."* Clearly the stakes are rising – Jesus' identity, his authority, his power, his willingness to break social and religious boundaries for his "kingdom of God," – all now threaten the status and privileges of the elders, the rabbis, and not least the Scribes and the Pharisees.

3) Are You the One?

And so we come to poor John the Baptist's question to Jesus: *"Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"* Is this faltering faith, or a challenge? Is John in fact registering his disapproval of Jesus' ministry so far? Where's the fire? Where's the judgment? Are you "the one"?

Because Jesus is redefining what God's Messiah is like, and it's not what John and many others expected. Jesus evokes the

prophecies of Isaiah – ultimately that he is Isaiah’s “Suffering Servant” – and goes back to the theme of his “manifesto sermon” in Nazareth. *“The Spirit has anointed me... to free the prisoners, give sight to the blind, release the oppressed.. and preach the good news to the poor.”* And he has been doing just that. You could not find two better examples than the Roman centurion and the widow of Nain. Both were “outsiders,” both were people on the edge of Jewish society, a man and a woman with no status as Jews; members of “the poor” – the very people Jesus had come to bring “good news” to.

How does Jesus reply to John? Here’s what I am doing; here’s how my Father’s kingdom is coming; and *“blessed is the man who does not fall away because of me.”* It’s a strange expression – literally it says “who does not stumble over me” – in common usage, “who is not offended by me.” It’s possible, Jesus says, to find my ways and my ministry an obstacle to your receiving God’s grace and blessing. I may disappoint you; I may not be the Messiah you imagined.

And somewhere we sense in John’s question the universal human tendency to tell other people *“I wouldn’t have done it that way.”* Even today – perhaps especially today when everyone is an expert – in the face of any major challenge, any crisis, any trauma, we have a nasty way of criticizing other people for how they are handling things. Soon the focus is off the problem, and onto the way it’s being dealt with. *“I wouldn’t have done it that way.”*

It’s an attitude that ruins faith – we cannot trust and obey a God we think should run the world differently, or who could have made salvation easier, without all that blood and sacrifice. It’s an attitude that divides churches, when any decision made by the leadership is constantly second-guessed by people whose main spiritual gift is

apparently criticism. It’s an attitude that breaks up marriages, especially in the wake of trauma. I still recall over 20 years ago hearing a surgeon who has about to perform an emergency appendectomy on Marian say *“Promise me you two won’t divorce over this.”* When we asked what on earth he meant, he said he was considering retiring because he was sick of hearing at patients’ 6-month post-surgical check-ups that their marriage had broken up!

That’s a threat whenever a family experiences a major trauma – a death, the loss of a job, major surgery, cancer, heart attack, a child in trouble – after the initial trauma is survived comes the “post-traumatic stress,” which includes not just emotional exhaustion, not only “when is it going to be my turn to get all the attention?” but also “I would have handled that differently.” We need to be very careful about criticizing people who have done the best they know how to do for not doing it the way we would have done it!

Or putting it in different language, as Jesus replies to John – and there is almost sarcasm in his words – *“I’m sorry if I offended you..!”* We are too quick to take offence at, to stumble over, to fall away from, people who disappoint us in the way they do things, who do not live up to our expectations; and we feel free to tell them *“I wouldn’t have done it that way.”*

So in every generation there are people who are offended by Jesus. *“He doesn’t say or do what I would like him to. He mixes with strange people (in the 1st century and the 21st century), and I don’t care much for them. He seems very right-wing; or maybe he’s really a closet bleeding-heart liberal? Anyway I don’t much care for him, for his ideas, or especially for his friends.”* Does Jesus offend you? Do his followers? Do they do things that you don’t like? Do you want to say to

many of Jesus' followers "I would not do it that way..."?

Jesus says "Blessed is the man (or the woman) who does not feel that I have let him down... who is not offended by me... who does not stumble over me.." Lord, deliver us from questioning and from taking superior attitudes toward Jesus, or his followers, or to those who are near and dear to us.

Let us pray...