

Worthy of Healing

Luke 7.1-10

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SERMON

[from the anthem] “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news, announcing peace!”

This is one of my favorite passages in Isaiah. In fact I talked about it so much that one of the young people at University Baptist Church gave me a going-away gift of a beautiful photograph of feet with this text printed on it.

How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.

It’s one thing to think good thoughts with your head.

It’s another to say good things with your mouth.

It’s even better to do good work with your hands.

But to take good news out into the world with your feet, well that’s a beautiful thing.

So we should not be surprised that Jesus stands up in his hometown synagogue and quotes the words a little later in Isaiah: “The Spirit is upon me to *bring* good news to the poor.” And so Jesus goes out from his hometown to Capernaum where we have this story at the beginning of Luke 7.

Now before I read this, let me give you a little background.

First, it shouldn’t be lost on any of us that this is a story about a Roman military officer. Nice that the lectionary should give us a text about a soldier on Memorial Day weekend. However, as you know, Roman soldiers like this one who were part of the military occupation of the country, were not very popular.

It may be that Luke tells this story here because Jesus has just read that passage in Isaiah about the Spirit being upon him to bring good news. If you know the rest of that story, you know that it didn't go so well for the hometown boy after the Isaiah part.

When Jesus explains that what he means is that he is following in the footsteps of Elijah who went into enemy territory to feed the widow of Zarephath, the mood in that hometown crowd begins to change.

And when he says that he is following in the footsteps of Elisha who healed a commander in the Syrian army – the sworn enemies of his people – the crowd gets so furious with him that they are ready to throw him off a cliff.

So, just how far would Jesus go to bring good news?

Well, like Elisha, here is this story about Jesus going to heal someone in the household of a Roman military commander responsible for the occupation of his country.

Now, just to make things more interesting, modern Biblical scholars have begun to wonder about this soldier in the story and the person identified as his “slave.” That’s because the Greek used here in Luke and in Matthew isn’t exactly “slave” but language that indicates this person was something more. He was, in fact, someone who could be described, they say, as a “male lover.” And we know historically that such a thing would not be unusual. At the very least this is an “honored one” or, better, a “beloved one.”

So, it looks like, long before “don’t ask; don’t tell” there is this underground story about a soldier and his beloved one. And the soldier is so concerned about this beloved one that he is willing to risk his military status to ask this upstart Jewish preacher to heal him.

So if you are reading the story along with me in Luke 7.1-10, I am going to read what you have as “slave” as “beloved one.”

Luke 7.1-10

¹After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ²A centurion there had a beloved one, 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 beloved one. 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 beloved one 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 [this is a different word here], “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 this beloved one in good health.

Just how far would Jesus go to bring good news? Apparently all the way to the home of a military commander in an occupying army with a beloved one for a partner.

Now this is a great story. In a lot of ways it is good news about the inclusive love of God reaching out beyond the boundaries of our human expectations.

But I have to tell you that this story makes me sad. It breaks my heart that it gets healing caught up in the question of worthiness.

The people say to Jesus that this military officer is “worthy” of this healing because he loves our people and built us a synagogue.

And the soldier himself is supposed to get extra credit, I guess, for saying, “I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; only say the word and my beloved one will be healed.”

Some of the most heart-wrenching stories I know are about people who get healing all mixed up with worthiness.

We look at someone who has done all this great work and they get sick and we say to ourselves: Well, come on God, look at all the good she has done, certainly she is worthy of healing.

Or we look at folks who have made a total mess of their lives and we wonder if they are really worth healing at all.

Perhaps you saw the news reports about the Governor of Maine and the legislature there refusing to pay for a drug that first responders use to immediately counteract the effects of a heroine overdose. Because what’s the point? They are just going to overdose again. Why spend the money?

What does it say about us when we decide that people caught in addiction are just “junkies” that aren’t worth healing?

When Pastor Ned was talking about that person who died of an overdose across the street in the bushes in front of the Polyclinic, I kept thinking:

This was somebody's child; somebody's friend; somebody's beloved one.

On this Memorial Day weekend I'm thinking about that WWII vet – that veteran of the “good war” – who called into a talk show with the author of *War and the Soul* and shouted: “...someone out there help me!”

And so author and clinical psychologist, Edward Tick, went out to meet him. And he found Ben in a tiny room in a beat-up hotel. And when he got there, Ben said:

Thank you for coming, I can't believe you came to see me after what I said on the radio. Usually people run the other way when I talk like that ... I tried working. I tried marriage. But everything I touched was ruined. It all began with WWII. That war taught me that I'm a killer. Since then, places like this miserable room have been my only home. Is there any chance for me to find peace and forgiveness before I die?

What Ben wants to know is if he is worthy of healing.

What have we done if we have made healing a matter of worthiness?

In the story from Luke this morning, it doesn't matter if the people think the soldier is worthy or if the soldier thinks he isn't. What matters is that there is this beloved one for whom the soldier is willing to risk his status in order that the one he loves can be healed.

I know that I have told this story before. But it is Memorial Day weekend and it's good to remember the lessons I have learned about healing.

Every day I am living into that conundrum of the human condition that means I remember the things I wish I could forget and forget the things I wish I could remember.

And I don't want to forget what I learned about healing that Memorial Day all those years ago. It was the day I was first introduced to this hymn we are about to sing.

It was at the height of the AIDS crisis and I was a volunteer with the AIDS Pastoral Care Network in Chicago. We decided to have a service on Memorial Day to remember those who had died and to offer some comfort to those who were left behind.

We didn't know if anyone would come. But they did. They came by the hundreds. They stood in the aisles. They crowded on to the chancel. They gathered around the open doors and windows outside.

And there were all kinds of people. People our government at the time didn't think were worth it. The country had decided by policy and funding and legislation that we weren't worthy of healing.

But there we all were.

And when the time came for us to come forward and write the names of those we loved and lost on these huge white banners, we started to sing:

*Healer of our every ill;
Light of each tomorrow;
Give us peace beyond our fear;
And hope beyond our sorrow.*

And they came. And we sang. And they kept coming. And we kept singing. And we held each other and we cried and hoped and we prayed and we never once had to ask ourselves if we were worth it -- worthy of peace beyond our fear or hope beyond our sorrow because, for that moment, in that place, we were beloved ones.

And so we are going to sing this hymn again today because here's the good news:

Healing doesn't happen because other people think we are worthy of it.
And it doesn't happen because we think we aren't.
It happens simply in that moment when we know ourselves to be
beloved ones.

So today, whatever other people might say about you or whatever you
might say about yourself, I hope that, today, if you hear that voice that
says, "I love you," do not harden your hearts because whatever healing
you need depends on it.

NOTES

The clearest explanation of the healing of the centurion's beloved is by Daniel A. Helminiak, Ph.D. in *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality* (Alamo Square Press, 2000), pp.127-130. The interview with Ben is found in Edward Tick's *War and the Soul* (Quest Books, 2005), pp.152-153.