

THE GREAT FAITH OF THE CENTURION

Luke 7:1-10

Key Verse: 7:9

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel."

On Tuesday, May 24, 2022, P. Ron and I arrived in Seattle to join a World Mission Forum. A pastor of the host church picked us up at the airport and gave us a ride to the hotel where we would stay. When we were close to the hotel, we stopped for lunch at a teriyaki restaurant. After ordering food, we sat at table and heard news from the TV of the restaurant. "Active Shooter Reported at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas—19 kids and 2 teachers killed." What? 19 kids and 2 teachers were killed? We were very shocked at the news. As a father of two children, I felt very sad about the lives of our young children who became victims and felt sympathy for their parents. "How can this kind of massacre happen in this country?" But, in reality this kind of massacre had happened at a supermarket in Buffalo, NY just 10 days before the shooting in Texas. (show slide w/a photo) On May 14, 2022, ten Black people were killed, and three others were injured by an 18-year-old white man who described himself as an ethno-nationalist supporting white supremacy. It was a hate crime against the Black community that retains unforgettable memories in American history. We reject racial discrimination and speak up for the equality of all people. P. Teddy expressed the pain of his church community for the Buffalo racist attack through an e-mail saying, "The Triton-UBF Chapter dedicated last SWS [5.22.2022] as a Prayer/Lament and an outcry against the racially motivated killings in Buffalo NY last week. We wanted to grieve alongside the African American families of our own chapter [as well as all our NA African American UBF family] and to share with them in their anguish, concern, and outrage over racially motivated violence in the nation..." However, it seems that crime and violence don't stop in this nation. Why? I believe that it is because people of our society lost a Christian value that all humans are the bearers of the image of God.

During the last three weeks we learned the Sermon on the Plain that is the Magna Carta for the disciples of Jesus. The teachings of Jesus are very beautiful, but very difficult to practice: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (6:27). As the disciples of Jesus, we must grow spiritually to the point of loving our enemies, doing good to those who hate us, blessing those who curse us, and praying for those who mistreat us. If all people in the world practice the word of Jesus as his disciples, we will restore the image of God and our world will be changed to be a kingdom of God. I think that it is not an accident that we have the story of the centurion right after the Sermon on the

Plain of Jesus in Luke's gospel. Even though he was a Roman officer and was not a disciple of Jesus, he had the image of God and revealed the love of God to his neighbors. Furthermore, his faith was so great that Jesus was amazed at him. We can learn two important things from the story of the centurion: first, the image of God was revealed through the centurion; second, great faith in Jesus was revealed through the centurion.

First, the image of God was revealed through the centurion. When Jesus entered Capernaum, a centurion's servant was sick and about to die (2). Matthew 8:5 says that he lay at home paralyzed, suffering terribly. We don't know what had happened with the servant. Maybe he fell from the roof of his master's house while repairing it and got paralyzed. Anyway, he couldn't work anymore and was about to die. The Greek word δούλος (doulos) means 'slave' rather than 'servant.' In the Roman world, slaves were subject to the absolute power of their owners and experienced a kind of "social death." They were separated from their families, tribes, identities, sense of honor and dignity, self-determination over their bodies and time, and the legal protections enjoyed by free persons. Slaves were regarded as property of their masters and could be abandoned if they were sick.

On the other hand, a centurion held a position in the Roman army, nominally in command of 100 soldiers. They were usually career soldiers and formed the real backbone of the Roman military force. Soldiers need to be merciless and inhumane because they should kill their enemies in battle. If soldiers are merciful and don't want to kill their enemies in a war, what will happen? They will be killed by their enemies, and their people will lose the war. I joined the army to perform my duty for 26 months as a South Korean citizen. But I was so sentimental that I had a lot of internal conflict thinking, "How can I kill a North Korean young man who could be a good friend of mine if we meet at a college as classmates? I will not shoot them." But the military trainers didn't allow me to be weak or sentimental. They often shouted at me, gave me physical punishments, trained me so hard that I was changed to be ready to shoot enemies and kill them if a war broke out.

I think that the centurion of today's passage had to kill enemies in battle; however, he didn't lose love for others. He was not violent nor disrespectful like many other centurions. The centurion highly valued his slave and felt very worried about him when he was sick and about to die. He could just abandon his slave as many others did, but he didn't do it because he loved his slave. The centurion's love of his slave was not just theoretical, but practical. When he heard of Jesus, he sent some elders of the Jews to Jesus, asking him to come and heal his slave. It was not easy that a Roman centurion asked a favor of the Jewish elders for his slave. I think that he had tried many other ways to heal his slave, but it didn't work. Finally, he heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him to heal his slave. The centurion respected the life of his slave because he loved him.

His love of others was revealed not only for his slave but also for the people of Israel, a colonized nation by the Roman Empire. As a Roman officer, the centurion had authority over

the Jewish community of his region and could oppress them with the colonizing power of his empire. But he didn't exercise his military power over the colonized people. On the contrary, he loved the Israelites and helped them with his authority. He respected the God of Israel and built a synagogue for them. Possibly he had to give his own money to support the construction. His love of the Jewish people was genuine and the elders of the Jews in his region felt his love of the nation of Israel. The centurion and the elders of the Jews had a very good relationship. Thus, when the centurion asked a favor of them, they willingly accepted it and went to Jesus to ask his help. It was not easy for the elders to ask a favor of Jesus. But they pleaded earnestly with Jesus saying, "This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue" (4-5).

Furthermore, the centurion respected the Jewish culture and tradition. He sent some elders of the Jews to Jesus, asking him to come and heal his servant. Matthew 8:5 describes that the centurion came to Jesus, but I think that Luke described this story in more detail than Matthew. Why didn't he go to Jesus directly? Some may think that the centurion had authority to order Jesus to come to his house through sending some elders. But it is not true. The centurion explained it by sending his friends to say to Jesus, "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. This is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you" (6-7a). He felt that he did not deserve to have Jesus come under his roof because he was a gentile while Jesus was a Jew. The Jews didn't enter the homes of gentiles in observance of their law and tradition. The centurion understood the Jewish tradition and respected it. He humbled himself before Jesus saying that he did not deserve to have Jesus come under his roof. It is very interesting to note that he felt undeserving, while the Jewish elders said that the centurion deserved to receive the help of Jesus.

The centurion was a man who loved and respected his slave as well as the colonized people. His story makes us ruminant about our own society. Many people in our society associate slaves with black people because of the American history of slavery that began in 1619 when 20 Africans were landed in the English colony of Virginia.¹ But in the Greco-Roman world of the time of Jesus, neither skin color nor ethnic/racial origins indicated slave status in the population of the Roman Empire.² Aníbal Quijano, a Peruvian sociologist, states that after the colonization of America and the expansion of European colonialism to the rest of the world, race and racial identity were established as instruments of basic social classification.³ Even after the Emancipation Proclamation issued by the President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863, during the Civil War, the racial discrimination by skin color has been one of the most

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/African-American>

² Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald, eds., *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 172 (Kindle).

³ Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America" in Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui, eds., *Coloniality At Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 181-224.

critical problems in American society, as we just experienced through the massacre made by the hate crime in Buffalo. (a photo if possible) After the covid-19 pandemic broke out, anti-Asian hate crimes increased by 339 percent in 2021 in America. One month ago, a 68-year-old Asian woman was punched to the ground by a stranger in New York City. It was not the first case in New York, and the city became notorious for anti-Asian hate crime. In those days, my daughter had to visit the Korean Consulate in Manhattan, New York by herself to renew her passport. She wanted to go to Manhattan by subway from the express bus terminal. But my wife and I didn't allow her to go there by subway because of the anti-Asian environment in that city. This is the reality of our American society.

But how can we build up a new society where people love and respect each other? How could the centurion be a man who loved and respected others? We can assume that he was a God-fearing man because he loved the Jewish nation and built a synagogue for the Jews. Probably he read the Jewish scripture and got to know the God of Israel. Most importantly, he had Imago Dei, the image of God as a human created by God. All humans regardless of their faith, their social position, their race and ethnicity, their gender, etc. have the image of God because all of us were created by God and have the same dignity as the bearers of God's image. In fact, the consequence of sin is that the glory of the Imago Dei is diminished. The image of God is shattered and destroyed by sin, but it doesn't have to remain broken. God sent his one and only Son Jesus to the world to save all humanity and restore the image of God in us. Ephesians 2:14 says, "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility." To be a disciple of Jesus means to restore the image of God in us. Therefore, those who know God realize that the image of God is in him or her and find his or her own dignity and worth before the Creator. They can esteem and value their own lives and do their best to glorify God throughout their lives. Furthermore, they can love and respect others as the same bearers of the image of God. Hate crime and hostility cannot exist in our society if we restore the Imago Dei and recognize the Imago Dei in others. The division and discrimination we see in humanity due to race, ethnicity, class, or gender will be steadily broken down when we read and obey the word of God: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Ga 3:28). Therefore, we should be faithful disciples of Jesus through obeying his words and being transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Then, God will transform our society to be a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation by using us as the salt of the earth, and the light of the world.

Second, great faith in Jesus was revealed through the centurion. The real greatness of the centurion comes from his genuine faith in Jesus. When he heard of Jesus who had healed a paralyzed man, a small seed of faith was planted in his heart. His mind was filled with hope on Jesus thinking that his servant also could be healed. His faith was not static, but dynamic. He appealed to some elders of the Jews to meet Jesus and ask him to come and heal his servant. He believed that his servant could be healed if Jesus would come to his home and

raise him up. Meanwhile as Jesus was coming to his house after accepting the plea of the elders, the centurion meditated more on Jesus. Then, his spiritual eyes were opened more by the work of the Holy Spirit, and he realized that Jesus was the commander-in-chief who had supreme power over the universe. As he was an officer of the Roman army, he could perfectly understand the power of the word of the commander. In this way, his faith grew to blossom. He believed that Jesus could heal his servant just by saying words because his words had power. Hence, the centurion immediately sent his friends to say to Jesus: "But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." (7b-8). Jesus was amazed at his faith and immediately healed his servant. The centurion's faith bore fruit of experiencing the healing power of Jesus on his servant.

We can learn two important things through the great faith of the centurion.

Number one, the faith of the centurion was alive and growing. The small seed of faith planted in his heart sprouted, blossomed, and bore fruit to the point of experiencing the healing power of Jesus. His faith grew so great that Jesus was amazed at him. How could this happen to him? It was because he heard of Jesus and meditated on him constantly. Romans 10:17 says, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ." Our faith in Jesus can grow when we hear the word of God and get to know Jesus more and more. The more we know Jesus, the stronger will be our faith in Jesus. Therefore, we should love more the word of God and pray more deeply to get to know Jesus better through the work of the Holy Spirit. We will be very sad if some of us don't grow in faith, just as we are sad if a child doesn't grow. Our faith needs to grow always as we need to know Jesus more and more. We can read the Bible and pray personally to grow in faith. But if we read the Bible communally and pray together, we can be more encouraged to know Jesus better.

Number two, the faith of the centurion grew because he contextualized his faith in Jesus. He tried to understand what faith meant to him and found that faith was the power of the word of Jesus in the light of his personal experiences as a Roman soldier. Thus, he could perfectly understand how to practice faith in his own situation. Each person has different life experiences in different cultures, situations, and growth environments. Our God will reveal himself to us differently according to our own life experiences. I was born in South Korea and met Jesus when I was a college freshman. I was an atheist; thus, my conversion was very radical through the power of the Holy Spirit. I lived in Venezuela for 17 years being exposed to the Pentecostal church practices. So, the tendency of my faith is passionate and emotional rather than reasonable. I received theological formation from an evangelical American seminary school and have been living in this country for 9 years. Hence, my faith is sensitive to the social justice and equality of the American society and humanity in general. This is the reason why today I spoke much about the image of God in relation to racial discrimination.

When we contextualize our faith, our perspective on God will become wider and we can grow more in knowing Jesus personally.

Jesus was amazed at the great faith of the centurion. Turning to the crowd following him, Jesus said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel" (9). Jesus commended the centurion's faith to encourage his followers to have great faith like him. There were two times when Jesus was amazed in the gospel books. One is that Jesus was amazed at the great faith of the centurion and the other is that Jesus was amazed at the lack of faith of the people of his hometown (Mk 6:6). How do you want to amaze Jesus? By faith? Or by unbelief? Hebrews 11:6 says, "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." I pray that we get to know Jesus more and more so that our faith can grow, and we can please God with faith. Amen.