

Second Sunday after Pentecost  
Galatians 1:1-12, Psalm 96, Luke 7:1-10  
May 29, 2016  
David Teschner

I rarely ever come up with titles for sermons, but after reading the gospel from Luke, I can think of three possibilities. The first is "Amazing Faith," similar to the song title "Amazing Grace." The second is "An Unlikely Hero." And the last possible title is "A Surprise for Jesus."

I could summarize this gospel story in one sentence then by combining these three titles. Here it is. "An unlikely hero expresses amazing faith much to the surprise of Jesus."

The unlikely hero, of course, is the unnamed centurion. A centurion in the first century was a middle-ranking Roman army officer. (Nice to have a military man featured on this Memorial Day weekend.) He was called a centurion because he had approximately 100 soldiers or a century of men under his command. He is an unlikely hero precisely because he is a Gentile Roman soldier living in Israel and a member of the unwanted occupying force there.

The only other time that a centurion gets a favorable nod in any of the four gospels is when the centurion guarding Jesus' crucifixion states that Jesus is the Son of God after witnessing his courageous death.

In Acts, the other book supposed to be written by the same author as Luke's gospel, the first Gentile convert to faith in Jesus is a centurion living in Joppa named Cornelius.

The centurion in today's gospel is living in Capernaum, which is believed to be the town on the Sea of Galilee where Jesus lived as an adult when he left Nazareth. Tensions between Gentile Roman soldiers and Jews would have been eased in the more rural north of Israel around the Sea of Galilee. It may be the difference between how today police are thought of in large urban areas as compared to counties and smaller towns where everyone knows each other.

This particular centurion, keeper of the peace in Capernaum, is extremely well thought of by the locals. He is familiar enough with the Jewish leaders or elders to ask them to make an appeal to Jesus. When they do, they tell Jesus that he is not only worthy, but he loves their fellow Jews. In fact, he built the synagogue for them.

This is obviously no ordinary Roman soldier who would otherwise dislike, distrust, take advantage of, and feel superior to the native population under his watch. This centurion seems to have found that the Jewish faith with its one supreme being was inspiring and nourished his soul.

Not only does he have love and respect for the Jewish people, but this whole story stems from the love and respect he also holds for his slave. We are told that he valued him highly and therefore sent for Jesus to restore him to health.

This centurion is in every respect an exceptionally open-minded and big-hearted human being. No wonder Jesus is surprised.

Not long ago I read a book titled, Active Hope, How to Face the Mess We're In Without Going Crazy. It was written by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone. In the chapter titled, "A Wider Sense of Self," the authors describe what they call "connected selves" versus "disconnected selves."

They suggest that we who are living in industrialized nations are becoming more and more disconnected selves because of our modern consumer culture and the extreme individualism that accompanies it. Whereas village life once meant everyone working together for the good of the whole community, today many are working for their own success or that of their group. They write that this development "divides people into winners and losers, with constant pressure to come out on top."

We can see this with people who want to separate and divide us up by our race, our ethnic origin, our religious preference or our gender.

Connected selves, on the other hand, are part of many and diverse circles of people – family, neighborhood, faith group, local community and nation. What we might call the human society or web of life. The more and more different and varied circles we consider ourselves part of, the more connected, safe and satisfied we feel. Connected selves experience what is most valued in life: love, friendship, loyalty, trust, belonging, purpose, gratitude, spirituality, mutual aid, meaning and overall well-being.

One of the best groups I ever joined here has been Downtown Churches United, which has extended my friendships to people all over Petersburg. It is rare that I go anywhere in the city where I don't know one or two people I have gotten to know through a 26-year membership in DCU.

Over the next several months our political hopefuls will do everything in their power to make us afraid and suspicious of everyone and anyone who looks different or thinks differently than you and I do. They will try to convince us that being a disconnected self is preferable to being a connected self.

The centurion in Luke's gospel is an exceptional human being, even though he lives far from home, because he has cultivated numerous circles of strong relationships:

Family, Friends, Soldiers ranked above and below him,  
Jews, Slaves and servants, and now Jesus

He is undoubtedly a connected self by all the evidence we get in this short story. He is a respecter of people at every level of society. He is probably more like Jesus himself than anyone we have or will meet in the four gospels. He is a holy man.

He is a model for us as he fulfills that part of our Baptismal Covenant where we promise to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.”

I came across this quote from Arthur Ashe’s book, Days of Grace. Keep in mind, it was written after he was diagnosed with terminal HIV AIDS from an untested blood transfusion. There were no remedies back then. He wrote, “I am a fortunate, blessed man. Aside from AIDS and heart disease, I have no problems. My step mother... is in fine health; my wife is in fine health, my daughter radiates vitality. I have loving friends in abundance. I have the support of skilled doctors and nurses. I need nothing that money can buy. So why should I complain? And beyond them,” he writes, “I have God to help me.”

He sounds like he was a very connected self.

Jesus, of course, is the perfectly connected self with ever widening circles that included all kinds of people and all creation. Connected to him and one another through amazing faith, we too might become unlikely heroes and surprise ourselves. AMEN.