

**Series: The Words of Jesus on Healing**  
**Today: Commitment, Compassion, and Conviction**  
**Text: Matthew 8:5-13**

**A sermon preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.**  
**Sunday, March 29, 2009 (Fifth Sunday in Lent)**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

It seems all we can think about is the economy these days. It creeps into just about every conversation we have. Even the stories you have been sending reflect our obsession. Here we are, in the midst of our series on healing, and someone sent me a story about two older men talking about their health problems after church one day. One was proud of the fact he went to a doctor who was a more holistic practitioner, and he told his friend, "My new doctor doesn't just treat the body. She treats both the mind and the body." The second man grunted and thought for a moment; then he asked, "Does she give a discount if the mind is already gone?"

This morning I would like to get your mind off the economy for a few moments as we take up yet another one of the healing miracles in the life of Jesus. This one takes place just after Jesus has finished the Sermon on the Mount which covers Matthew 5, 6, and 7. Jesus was coming down from the place where he had been teaching, and isn't it interesting that the very first thing he does is to heal. In the verses which precede our text, he heals a man with leprosy. Now, as he arrives in Capernaum, a centurion approaches him on behalf of his servant.

Today I want to examine this text from three different perspectives as they relate to healing and faith: 1) Commitment; 2) Compassion; and 3) Conviction.

## Commitment

The Centurion was a man of commitment. In a Roman Legion there were 6,000 troops, and the legion was divided into 60 centuries; 100 men in each century. Each century was commanded by a centurion. They were responsible for the discipline of the regiment. William Barclay says that “they were the cement which held the army together.” (DSB, “Matthew,” p. 301)

Centurions were men of honor and men of discipline. They knew what it was to give orders and to carry them out, and this centurion applied the same commitment to his faith. He came to Jesus because he was committed to the well-being of his servant. He was willing to do whatever it took to help his servant regain his health again, and Jesus honored that kind of commitment.

This morning, when I turned my cell phone on, there was a text message waiting for me. I don't know who the sender is. I have a phone number, and I will call after this service. However, the message was poignant: *“Please pray for me. I am feeling down today.”*

I received a note from one of our nieces yesterday asking if I would pray for her three-year-old son whose name is Jake. Jake has been experiencing health challenges lately, and he is scheduled for some diagnostic tests on Friday. *“Please pray for us. I am scared.”*

Now I want you to know that I am honored when anyone asks if I will pray for them. I consider it a great privilege and a sacred duty to carry those who request prayer to the feet of Jesus. So of course, I intend to carry Jake and the sender of the text message to the feet of Jesus in prayer. I hope I can be as faithful for them as the

centurion was for his servant. However, a part of me wanted to begin a conversation with both of them.

Our niece, Cathy, is like many young people her age. She was baptized a Roman Catholic, but participating in a church was never important to her parents until after she was out of the house. She never learned how to pray or when to pray. Now that she is faced with a personal crisis, she wants to pray, but she doesn't know how to pray and she does not know the One to whom she is praying. She isn't exactly sure what to say or how to act, and so she turns to the one in the family who makes his living at prayer.

I will do what Cathy asked me to do. I will pray for Jake, and for his doctors, and for all who will be attending him this coming Friday. However, what I would like to tell Cathy is that I am no different than she is when it comes to prayer. My prayers are no better than her prayers. The only thing that makes us different is that I really believe in what the Bible teaches; that the prayers of righteous people do avail much (James 5:16). And that faith leads me to believe that God wants what is good and right and healthy for each of one of us all the time, not just when we are in a crisis.

Jesus honored the faith commitment of the centurion because he could see that he really believed that faith can make a difference. He believed there was a power greater than himself who could restore his servant. He didn't know what to call that power, but he believed nonetheless. He brought his faith to Jesus, and Jesus honored that commitment.

### **Compassion**

The Centurion was also a man of compassion. We know this because of the attitude he had toward his servant. It was not the usual attitude that a master had for a

servant. In the Roman Empire slaves did not matter. It was of no importance to anyone other than their families if they suffered and whether they lived or died.

In the time of slavery in our own country people had similar attitudes toward African-American slaves in this country. They were considered property; what Aristotle called “living tools.” However, the centurion treated his slave like a human being. He cared deeply about his well-being. He was willing to go to whatever length necessary to see to it that he was well again.

Compassion is the ability to feel with the other person. It is making an attempt to understand the joy or the sorrow that the other person may be carrying and then to identify with them enough to want to help in ways which are meaningful to them. It isn't about making ourselves feel better. It is about entering into another person's life long enough so they know they are not alone whatever circumstance they may be facing.

I read a great story on ESPN.com the other day about compassion. It was about a young man named Johntell Franklin. When Franklin's mother lost her battle with cancer on February 7, 2009, no one was surprised to hear that Franklin, a senior forward for the Milwaukee Madison High School basketball team (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), was not going to play in his team's game that day against DeKalb High School (DeKalb, Illinois). But then he showed up.

Midway through the second quarter, Franklin walked into the gym, ready to play. The only problem was that his name hadn't been entered into the scorebook. That meant that if Franklin took the floor, his team would be assessed a technical—two free throws for the DeKalb team.

Aaron Womack Jr., coach of Milwaukee Madison, and Dave Rohlman, coach of DeKalb, both met with the game's referee, begging the referee to make an exception to the rules. Though the referee was sympathetic to the situation, he stressed that the rules had to be followed, regardless of the extenuating circumstances. That's when something truly special happened.

When the referee would not budge, DeKalb's Darius McNeal volunteered to shoot the two free throws. McNeal went to the line, the referee handed him the basketball, and he set his feet to take the shot. But instead of a perfectly executed free throw, McNeal shot the ball just two feet in front of him, and the ball slowly bounced out of bounds. The referee picked the ball up, handed it back to McNeal, and McNeal did the same thing for the second shot. The crowd responded with a standing ovation.

Later, in an interview with the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, McNeal said, "I did it for the guy who lost his mom. It was the right thing to do." [source: ESPN.com news services, "Team's gesture supports grieving opponent," [www.espn.com](http://www.espn.com) (2-17-09)]

Jesus responded to the faith commitment which believed that he could make a difference as well as the compassion of the Centurion for his slave. He honored the relationship which restored the slave to the fullness of life and the fullness of relationship.

### **Conviction**

Finally, there is conviction. There is the conviction of the centurion that all Jesus needs to do is speak the word and his servant will be healed. There is the conviction of Jesus that when he had spoken the word, the servant was healed.

There is a great deal of research going on these days about the relationship between our faith convictions and healing. There have even been scientific studies which have shown the positive impact of prayer on those who are sick without them even knowing that they were being prayed for. However, the evidence is not conclusive, but there does seem to be some correlation between the positive sense of well-being which comes from the practice of a well integrated faith in the lives of those studied.

We cannot change the circumstances of our lives, but we can change our response to those circumstances. When people feel as though they are being carried by God through difficult times, it can have a positive impact on their overall well-being. When someone feels the support of a group of people praying for them, it cannot help but be a positive thing.

I received an email the other day from one of the members of this church who is being treated for cancer. She was thanking me for this series on healing and for Pastoral Care Staff who has been walking through this difficult journey. Here is part of what she wrote which I have used with her permission:

*“The doctors say I have beaten the odds so far. They don’t understand what is keeping me alive, but I do. I tell them the line you taught me about not knowing what the future holds, but knowing The One who holds the future. I believe it is good medicine and the power of healing prayer which has kept me going thus far, and I am grateful for the time I have been given. So continue to thank God with me, and continue to pray that the cancer be kept at bay until some other new drug comes along.”*

The centurion believed that Jesus had the power to heal, and Jesus believed that the power he had did not know the limits of time or space, and the servant was healed. It was their conviction in the power of God which was so powerful

### **Conclusion**

Commitment, Compassion, and Conviction: these three words make a difference in what we are able to do for others in the name of Christ. First, there is our total commitment to the power of God to heal and our willingness to do whatever is necessary to intercede for others. Then there is our compassion for the needs of others and our willingness to enter into their experience so that we may carry them to the feet of Jesus. Finally, there is our conviction that faith can and does make a difference in the process of healing. To God be the glory! Amen