



Finding Your Place – Luke 7: 1-10

Finding your place; knowing your place. Not *knowing* your place, as in home or apartment, the space you occupy; finding, knowing your *place*, where you fit into the scheme of things. This is important!

There will probably always be debate over the meaning of “freedom” – whether it’s being able to do what you want without concern for how your actions impact others, or the ability to do things together in free association, or the ability to think and say whatever comes to mind, regardless of the truth, or to be able to live without fear of oppression or want... All of these are current definitions of “freedom,” and there’s millions more.

But the Bible, where most of us believe at least the concept of human freedom derives, presents freedom as proper understanding of the relationship between us and God, and us and others. A devout Jew will say that freedom is God’s law, that there is freedom and even joy within the narrow bounds of God’s commandments to Moses. Christians have held for centuries that true freedom is found in the recognition of the Lordship of Christ. So does this lesson from Luke.

Once again, Jesus is called to help someone in need. While the centurion – a Roman soldier – is the focus of the story, the real need has to do with the centurion’s servant, who is near death.

There’s many very interesting things going on in this short story: remember that the centurion is an officer of the hated Roman occupation forces – a company commander, in charge of a hundred soldiers. He is the quintessential picture of someone the locals should HATE. And yet, he “loves our nation” – that is, Israel. And he’s not just powerful, but wealthy: he built a local synagogue! The very people who should hate him are bringing his request to Jesus – another subject, another Jew – for help. We could spend a lot of time the tangled relationships here!

But the crux of the whole story lies in three things: faith; humility; and wisdom.

Faith: that’s what impelled the centurion to seek Jesus’ help. Even though he’s a foreigner, even an enemy or THE enemy to the people around him, he’s discovered the God of Israel from those same people who look down at him, or (if they don’t know him) with hatred in their eyes. He’s not just become a follower of their God, he’s enhanced their worship, helped the people he’s supposed to keep in line remain devoted to their God. So when his favorite servant gets deathly ill, he asks *those people* for help, and they give it – suggesting the unlikely assistance of

this strange new teacher and healer, Jesus. And the centurion believes them, because he believes in the power of the God he's found. Faith.

Then comes humility, which is about knowing your place in the world. Humility is an important quality in a powerful leader, and one this man seems to have in just the right measure. He sends a message to Jesus, stating his unworthiness to have Jesus come personally (after all, he's only a Roman, just one of the oppressors), and in that message says something very important: he says that he's "a man under authority" – he knows that he is obliged to do what he's told to; that with authority comes responsibility, and with both ought to come humility. His role is to trust the authority he's under, and be trustworthy in how he uses his own authority – both of which require a degree of humility, and which require a sense of where you are in the larger scheme of things. In return, there's freedom in knowing where your boundaries are, and accepting them.

Augustine, bishop of the North African town of Hippo in the fifth century, wrote: "The way to Christ is first through humility, second through humility, third through humility. If humility does not precede and accompany and follow every good work we do, if it is not before us to focus on, if it is not beside us to lean upon, if it is not behind us to fence us in, pride will wrench from our hand any good deed we do at the very moment we do it."

Time after time, we're told in the Hebrew Scriptures that "fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" – knowing one's place in relation to God, humility, could easily replace the word "fear," that takes so much explanation.

Humility is not easy. In fact, it's very hard to practice humility, at least in a wise and healthy way. But it can be done, with God's help: at a memorial recently, a grandchild said of her grandmother: "After she'd done her hair, put on her makeup, and check one final time in her mirror, that was the last time she thought of herself for the rest of the day."

Faith in God brings humility – a sense of your place – which should then be fertile ground to grow wisdom.

Remember that wisdom is that divine quality that, if we're attentive to its voice, gives us the insight to see things as they truly are, as close to God's reality as possible for a human being.

An ER doctor was called to see a patient one bitter night in January, to see a woman in her eighties who was complaining of chest pain. She was clearly a special lady, surrounded by friends and family, even in the middle of the night.

All the tests seemed normal – the doctor even joked that he'd be happy to swap cholesterol levels with her! So he went on about his work, waiting for the rest of the results to come back.

Then her medical record was handed to him, and the doctor was struck by two things: one, how thin it was (she was one healthy lady), and two, that several times over the years, she'd showed up in the ER with chest pain, always in the middle of January.

So the doctor went back in to her, and as he questioned her, was led to ask, "Do you mind telling me how your husband passed away?" He discovered he'd tripped over the family "elephant in the room."

Just after World War Two, she and her husband were awakened in the middle of the night by the sounds of fire consuming their barn. Like many Northern New England barns, it was connected to the house by a covered walkway. She quickly got up, gathered the children, and took them outside to safety; her husband headed for the barn – and didn't return. That night, too, had been a frigid one, in the middle of January.

It turned out that this lady didn't have a diseased heart – she had a broken one. The healing she needed wasn't going to come from medicine, any more than her pain came from a physical disease. And the doctor? May we all have such wise physicians, who can be led by God's wisdom to the truth of the matter.

And so, here is a spiritual path to follow, a rule for us, a guide to find our place in God's world, and a way to be comfortable in it: faith leading to humility leading to wisdom. Let me make it very, very

simple, in the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, a great American theologian known more commonly as the Serenity Prayer:

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change (faith and humility); the courage to change the things I can (faith and humility); and the wisdom to know the difference.” Given these things, filled with this faith, humility and wisdom, we can find our place, our true freedom.

May we be wise; may we be humble; may we be faithful, in the freedom we have in Christ. Amen