

Is Our God Enough?

Vision Series

"Who is Invited?"

Matthew 8:5-13, with reference to Acts 10

February 17, 2019

Week 3 of 4

Welcome and Intro to the series...

Today we're looking at the next installment in a series of messages about who we are as CrossPoint church...why we exist and what we are doing together as a congregation. So, let me start by saying something – not about the Bible – but about our current culture. Stay with me for a moment while I unpack who we are and then give me a minute to connect the dots. We are living in a culture that has watched the people of God do some pretty amazing things...in both good ways and bad ways. Our current situation is a result of things like Adolf Hitler using the Bible to justify the extermination of millions of Jews during WWII. We are living with the results of a nation that went through the sixties and seventies. Space travel and racial injustice, Viet Nam and Woodstock...side by side. We are living in an age when a generation who thought their children would follow in their footsteps and value going to church like they did were greatly disappointed when that generation walked away from the church in droves. We are now living in a day when multiple generations of family members are not living out the Christian faith even though 86% of Americans say they believe in God. There is an increasing number of people – almost 20% of our society – who say they have no faith affiliation at all.

And most Churches have held on to antiquated practices that continue to make the Christian faith irrelevant to the world around us. And the answer for some churches has been a "fortress mentality" where they lock themselves away behind huge, mostly empty buildings, while the world around them is going to hell in a handbasket. Other churches have chosen to regain a place in our culture and become relevant to our generation...which has come with a lot of criticism from those who don't want to change. And people who study this kind of stuff are saying that we are getting closer and closer to the culture that the first Apostles walked into with the message about a healing, loving, and forgiving savior who can change the world. A world full of people who have never heard of Jesus other than when people use the name...

So, I want to look at a Centurion and Jesus and a conversation they had and ask ourselves how we can become more impactful in the culture we're living in right now. Jesus has a really interesting interaction with this career military leader. A centurion would have had to pledge allegiance to the Emperor, who was considered god and savior of Rome and worshipped by all. Soldiers participated in pagan religious oaths to the emperor. And this centurion is part of the army that was occupying Jesus' homeland of Palestine. Jews hated these Roman soldiers because they were the force behind the occupation of their holy land.

This Centurion comes to Jesus about his servant. Centurions were not permitted to have families while serving but, they could own servants. So, this servant, even though he was enslaved, may have been his only family while serving in Palestine. He seems to truly care about this servant and is willing to do what it takes to help him. He recognizes great authority in Jesus and so he approaches Jesus about his servant. He admits that he is not worthy for Jesus to come to his home. It wouldn't be right, under Jesus' religious laws, for Jesus to come to his home. But the Centurion recognizes Jesus' authority and contrary to the conventional Jewish thought at the time, is convinced that Jesus can perform a long-distance miracle. So, he humbles himself to a man that is of the class of his servant because he's heard that Jesus has a kind of spiritual power that, as a senior officer, he understands.

Can you imagine the disciples' jaws dropping as they see Jesus and the centurion having this conversation? A centurion comes to Jesus asking him to help his servant. His presence was a reminder that they were living in an occupied nation as a conquered people. How would any of us feel about the presence of an occupying army? Most of us would likely be angry, bitter, resentful. I suspect at least some of us would want Jesus to tell the centurion to get lost. Or we might be thinking the centurion had a lot of nerve to ask Jesus to heal his servant; we might even wonder if it was a trap. All these responses would be understandable...**and not at all how Jesus responds to the centurion.** Jesus has a love for and *openness to other people* that is greater than our own and I suspect he was intrigued at being approached by a centurion, someone in whom at this point even Jesus didn't expect to find faith. What a good thing for a of us to learn from Jesus...that if we're going to be community centered like he was, that...

Community centered means being open to others.

This centurion has a keen understanding of authority and power. For the most part, Roman centurions were too busy with the emperor's business to spend time thinking about the well-being of slaves. In this time in history, slaves were considered nothing more than property, expendable commodities that could easily be bought and sold. In demonstrating deep concern for his slave, the centurion showed that he was different than most men in his position. He did everything in his power to help his slave who had found a place in his heart and home. Battle-hardened and tough as the centurion likely was, he still had an intense desire to alleviate his slave's suffering. Most of the people at that time would have considered this to be a foolish request.

This passage says that Jesus marvels at the faith of this guy who is outside of the faith. And Jesus says to his followers that this faith of the Centurion is greater than most of Israel. In fact, the only other time the Bible says that Jesus "marvels" is in Mark when he marvels at his hometown's lack of faith! I find it interesting that Jesus does not require the man to have a certain creed, doesn't ask him to become a Jew, or to stop worshipping the emperor in order to engage with him and heal his servant. He sees the faith and is astonished and heals. Jesus exhibits a quality most of us struggle with...the ability to accept people where they are instead of where we want them to be. And if we're going to be a church that engages a community that has written off the church as irrelevant, we going to need to...

Community Centered means accepting people where they are.

You can be sure Jesus was criticized for engaging with a Roman centurion. I mean, people are still people, right. People back then would have been as critical as we can be today. We can be pretty self-righteous at times. If we're all honest with ourselves and we were standing there with Jesus we might have ask why he was even talking to this heathen, Roman soldier. So, who are the centurions to us? Who would we be going to in our community and in our country if we did what Jesus did? In a culture where there are plenty of people who seem far from God on the outside, we're told that over 80% of the people we know who don't go to church or follow Jesus would do so if they were invited by us. I'm an imperfect person who is incapable of making the kind of judgement call that should keep me from reaching out beyond these walls and into the community around us. That kind of judgement is up to Jesus...

Jesus decides who is in or out.

What Jesus does say to all of us is that everyone matters, everyone counts, and we should be slow to judge or we just might miss a person of great faith who's right around us. Are there groups or types of people that you may need to look at with new eyes in light of this gospel story? How many of us have friends of a different race or nationality, friends whose socio-economic status is significantly different than our own, friends who may dress differently, wear their hair differently, even ink and pierce their bodies? Can we look at individuals who are different than ourselves and not think *"they need fixed, changed, or to cover up"* and instead see someone God loves and for whom Christ died? That is the spiritual challenge for all of us. God tends to turn that upside down and challenge us. This is not the first or the last time this happened in our scriptures. Rapid fire examples...

Jonah Peter and the Disciples Shepherds on a hill side

Rahab Ruth and Mary

God wants to reach the community no matter who they are and will do it whether we're kicking and screaming like Jonah or he has to bringing us to a new understanding like does with his own disciples.

One of the beautiful things about a healthy church is it gives us the opportunity to be friends with people from so many different places than ourselves. Here at CrossPoint, we can be intentional about taking the first step to talk to someone with different ethnic backgrounds or from different places in this beautiful world of ours. Being part of the body of Christ which is the church gives us the opportunity to widen our circle of relationships and interaction. That means we are going to need to engage our community at greater levels than ever before. Who knows, we may meet someone with greater faith than we've ever seen before.

Who in your community are you going to reach out to this week?

As a community church we will continue to be active in community events, and to look for partnerships with people and organizations who are doing the kinds of things Jesus is all about.