

Amazed

Second Sunday After Pentecost

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Jill R. Russell

Texts: 1 Kings 18:20-21, 30-39;
Psalm 96;
Galatians 1:1-12;
Luke 7:1-10

We live in the age of the overstatement. Our conversations are peppered with superlatives. We will use the word *awesome* for something as pedestrian as a new ice cream flavor when the word used to be reserved for something like the first glimpse of the Grand Canyon or the experience of holding your child for the first time. Events that inspire actual awe. Now I am indicting myself in this observation. A quick perusal of my conversations will turn up a rather healthy dose of words like *fantastic*, *excellent*, and *fabulous*.

Because we trade superlatives so regularly in our speech we might have moved right past a very surprising moment in our gospel reading this morning. Did you catch it? It's toward the end of the passage that our text makes a rather interesting statement. Verse 9: "When Jesus heard this (meaning the words of the Centurion) he was amazed at him." Jesus is not prone in the gospels to superlatives like this. For Jesus to be amazed by someone's faith is rather striking. The question that I kept coming back to all week was "what was it about this man's faith that amazed Jesus?"

To begin to answer that question I want to go to the Old Testament story from 1 Kings. In many ways, the world of first and second kings is very distant from our reality. Rival prophets challenging each other to a show down to see whose god can rain down fire from heaven doesn't just sound strange but sounds embarrassingly primitive. Which is why I love to read the old testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, when I want to try to bridge that gap so that I don't get distracted by the cultural distance and miss the mirror that these ancient stories are holding up for us.

What's at stake, according to Brueggemann, in this showdown between Elijah, a prophet of YHWH, and Ahab, the king of Israel who has become a worshipper of Baal, is the way that each of these systems explains the ways of the world and the ways of faith. The reason Ahab was tempted by the religion of Baal was because he saw the kings around him manipulating the rituals of that religion to secure for themselves the resources and gifts of creation. Baal was a fertility god and was believed to be instrumental in the cycles of harvest and food production. So the kings who made sacrifices to Baal could then take credit for the harvest and commandeer for themselves large portions of said harvest. Access to resources = access to political power.¹

At the heart of Judaism is a fierce prohibition against idolatry. The reason is because the idols became a tool to manipulate the gifts of creation to wield power for the elite and create scarcity for the people. Can you feel the cultural gap disappearing when you hear the context described in that way?

What's at stake in this showdown is not braggart's rights that my God is better than your god. But instead the demonstration of YHWH's power was meant to invoke a profession of faith from the people: "The LORD indeed is God". The point was to convince people that the ways of God = the ways of life. The earth is a place of abundance when the gifts of creation are shared through an ethic of neighborly love.²

As we listen to this ancient story some very pressing and relevant questions emerge. What does it take for you to believe (by which I mean to live as if) the LORD is God? Where are those places of two opinions here we *want* to follow God but limp in that following because we are so pulled perhaps because of our anxiety toward the ways of idolatry: self-protection, manipulation, the mentality of us vs. them needing to make ourselves great so that we can keep *them* from coming after what is *ours*.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Kings, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2000), 219.

² Ibid, 228-229.

Look back at what we are told about this Centurion. He is an officer in the army of the Empire of Rome. He has every capacity to wield power, soldiers jump at his command, he could extract any of the resources and gifts of that part of creation. And yet what he is known for is his love for the Jewish people. He has not extracted the resources from that place but has in fact contributed to them. “It is he who built our synagogue for us,” the Elders tell Jesus. He is, however, bold to ask for Jesus’ help because of his love for his servant. He knows to ask Jesus because he has recognized in him the creative power of the LORD (of YHWH). He clearly believed (by which I mean he lived as if) the LORD indeed is God. He saw the LORD in Jesus: “Just speak the word, and let my servant be healed.” By stating his own power within the Roman Empire he is acknowledging to Jesus that none of that power matters (unlike the disciples who quibble over who will have such positions of power within the kingdom of God). This Centurion is not limping toward the idols that surround his life but believes that the LORD is indeed God. And Jesus is amazed by him.

I suspect that amazement comes on two fronts: first was his recognition about where true power lies. He has not bought into the privilege of his position. He does not operate from the place of command and demand (my fellow parents group will recognize that phrase as the default mode many of us parents fall into when we just want our kids to do what we want³). This is not the spirit with which he holds himself. He has invested in the community where he lives. He has built relationships of trust. He does not see himself as part of some powerful “other” looking to extract everything he can for himself and for his own. He sees the power of God’s ways and has invested in the ethic of love of neighbor.

I suspect the second place of amazement is his willingness to meet Jesus in a space of genuine humility and receptivity. When he says “I am not worthy for you to come under my roof” I don’t believe he is posturing here. You know what I mean by posturing. Putting on a false humility to try to manipulate Jesus into giving him what he wants. He is simply stating the truth of the matter: he knows that he is not a good man. Meaning he is

³ The phrase “command and demand” comes from Daniel J. Siegel and Tyna Payne Bryson, *The Whole Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Steps for Developing Your Child’s Brain* (New York: Random House, 2011).

not demanding that Jesus give to him what he wants because he has somehow racked up enough good deeds to make himself worthy of this healing. The Elders may have been thinking in that way but the Centurion was not. That whole concept – that some people are good and worthy and some are bad and undeserving - is frankly at the center of the escalating violence that has plagued the world from the beginning of time.

Some of us were present for a lecture by Duncan Morrow and James Alison at Hope College yesterday. The title is a little (wha-wha-wha-wha⁴): *The Principle and Practice of Renee Girard, Politics, Religion and Violence*. The part that will stay with me is when Duncan Morrow made the case for this posture of “not being a good person”.

Let’s just be honest about that. I do lots of good things. And so do you. I can be wretched. No truly I can. And so can you. There is incredible freedom in being able to simply tell the stinkin’ truth about that. Not to shrink in shame. The Centurion was incredibly bold in asking for what he wanted. It’s just that he brought that request (not demand) forward with such humility and so much receptivity that he blew Jesus away.

I want Jesus to be amazed when he looks at me. Don’t you? Not impressed. Impressed is about resume and all the ways that I think that I am good. NO! Not that! Amazed. Amazed at my honesty that I am not good or deserving. Amazed at my vulnerability that I know that I have deep needs that I cannot meet on my own. Amazed at my unwavering trust that I believe by which I mean that I live as if the LORD is indeed God!

Is not that your prayer?

That is my prayer.

Let’s pray it together.

Let’s keep praying it together until by the grace God it becomes true.

⁴ This is a reference to the Word with the Children when I talked about the sound all adults make on the cartoon *Peanuts*.