GREAT FAITH INVOLVES TWO CONFESSIONS

1. I am a great sinner
2. Jesus is a great Savior

As you read through Luke’s Gospel, when someone is said to be amazed, it is usually Jesus who is the object of their amazement. When Jesus, at 12 years old, visited the temple, people were amazed at his understanding and his answers. Later, when Jesus visited his hometown synagogue in Nazareth at the beginning of his public ministry, the people who heard him teach were impressed (amazed) by the words of grace that came from his mouth. Still later, on at least two occasions Jesus amazed people by driving out demons.

But here in Capernaum as Jesus returns from giving his Sermon on the Mount, it is the Savior’s turn to be amazed. The object of his amazement was a Roman centurion - a soldier, whom it appears Jesus did not even have opportunity to meet face-to-face. What was it that so amazed Jesus about this centurion? It was the centurion’s confession of his own unworthiness and his confession of the greatness of Jesus.

On December 21, 1807, John Newton, the author of the hymn Amazing Grace, lay dying. His legs were swollen, his sight was failing, and he found it difficult to speak. But he was able to say this to one of his visitors: My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things - that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.

That is essentially what this centurion at Capernaum was saying and that is what Jesus called great faith. GREAT FAITH INVOLVES TWO CONFESSIONS: The first is: I am a great sinner. The second is: Jesus is a great Savior.

A Roman centurion was an unlikely candidate to be an example of great faith. Relations between Jews and Roman soldiers were usually not warm. The Jews viewed the Roman soldiers as pagan oppressors and the Roman soldiers viewed the Jews as unreasonably proud and difficult to govern. Besides, this centurion was a Gentile! According to conventional Jewish thinking, Gentiles - even converted Gentiles - were second-class citizens in God’s kingdom, if that.

But this centurion was different. He apparently was not angry that he had been stationed in Galilee. He did not have any hostility toward the Jews. He appeared to be a kind man. His reason for sending emissaries to Jesus was that his servant, whom he valued highly, was sick and about to die. He was able to find some Jewish elders to go to Jesus on his behalf because he had been a friend to the people of Capernaum: he built them a synagogue. In fact, this man was such a benefactor to the Jews of Capernaum that these elders said to Jesus: He is worthy of having you do this for him, that is, he deserves to have you honor his request to heal his servant.

But deserves is not a word that the centurion himself would have used in approaching Jesus. He was amazingly humble. It was a source of constant irritation to some Roman soldiers that the Jews considered them to be a source of defilement. Jews would not enter the home of Gentile for fear of being rendered unclean by such a visit. Remember how the Jews did not want to enter the palace of Pontius Pilate on the morning of Good Friday? But this centurion did not chafe at the Jewish scruples. He sent Jewish emissaries to Jesus on behalf of his servant because he did not believe that he himself was worthy to come to Jesus. And when Jesus approached the centurion’s home, the centurion sent friends to say to Jesus: L, do not trouble yourself, because I do not deserve to have you come under my roof.

A person without faith does not behave so humbly. People without faith see no reason to prostrate themselves before Jesus, verbally or physically. They might resent Jesus or try to
ignore him or be oblivious to his true identity, but only faith can lead a person to recognize his unworthiness to be in the presence of Jesus. And remember, this is not Jesus shining in majesty. This is Jesus in his state of humiliation. The centurion’s humility was freely, not forcibly, rendered.

The centurion was right, of course. He was not worthy to come to Jesus nor was he worthy to have Jesus come under his roof. He was a filthy, disgusting sinner - like us. You meant it, didn’t you, when you said earlier: I am altogether sinful from birth. I have sinned against you and do not deserve to be called your child? We do not deserve to have Jesus turn his head even slightly in our direction. We certainly did not deserve to have him offer his life for ours at Calvary. Nor do we deserve that he should stoop to meet us here in Word and sacrament.

John Newton had his reasons for saying: I am a great sinner. He had for a time abandoned the Christian faith. At one time he described himself as a libertine, that is, a person unrestrained by any sense of morality. Rebellious and blasphemous, at another time he described himself as exceedingly vile. He did not go into detail, but we know that after a stint in the Royal Navy, he served on a slave ship. The apostle Paul, too, had his reasons for calling himself the worst of sinners - reasons like violence against Christians and blasphemy against God. And we have reasons for joining these men in confessing: I am a great sinner. After all, the point is not to compare ourselves with other sinners, but to compare selves with God’s standard for our conduct. By that standard - his holy, unchangeable law -we are all great sinners.

Martin Luther once wrote a letter to a fellow monk on this subject of identifying themselves as sinners. In the letter he said: My dear friar, learn Christ and him crucified. Learn to praise him and, despairing of yourself, say, Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what is mine and have given to me what is yours. You have taken upon yourself what you were not and have given to me what I was not. He went on to write: Beware of aspiring to such purity that you will not wish to be looked upon as a sinner, or to be one. For Christ dwells only in sinners.

We could learn something about humility from that centurion in Capernaum. But we could learn something else, too. The first part of the centurion’s confession was a confession about himself, about his unworthiness before Jesus. But the second part of his confession was about the greatness of Jesus. As we hear him continue, he said that Jesus is a great Savior.

When the centurion sent emissaries to Jesus rather than going himself, and when he told Jesus that he was not worthy to have him come under his roof, it does, of course, show us the humility of this centurion, but it also shows us how great he believed Jesus to be. Centurions were soldiers who were both under authority and in authority. They answered to higher authorities, but they also commanded the men under them. The name centurion means commander of a hundred. But this centurion knew that Jesus had far greater authority than he had. He said: But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I am also a man placed under authority, having soldiers under me. I say to this one, Go! And he goes; and to another one, Come! And he comes; and to my servant, do this, and he does it. His point was that if he, a mere commander of hundred men, can give orders and make things happen, then surely Jesus, as great as he is, can simply speak a word and heal his ailing servant. And the centurion’s faith in the greatness of Jesus was vindicated. Luke does not even tell us that Jesus spoke a word. He simply says that when the men who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.

The centurion was right in his assessment of Jesus. In faith he trusted Jesus’ power to
heal his servant and he was not disappointed. Another centurion, the one who led the squad of soldiers sent to crucify Jesus, would deliver a similar assessment of Jesus’ greatness. After the three hours of darkness and the death of Jesus and the tearing of the great veil in the temple, the centurion who witnessed Jesus’ death, said: **Truly this man was the Son of God!**

Like the disciples, we are sometimes slow to realize the implications of Jesus’ greatness. Remember how they faltered when Jesus asked them where they could buy bread for 5,000 people to eat out there by the Sea of Galilee? Remember how they faltered when caught in a sudden storm on the Sea of Galilee? **Teacher, don’t you care that we are about to drown?** they asked him. And you remember how they faltered when he went off to die on the cross. That very night they all fell away on account of him. In each case, this faltering stemmed from failing to trust Jesus, from failing to be confident in the greatness of Jesus.

He is great. Before he was born, the angel told Mary about Jesus: **He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.** In his letter to the Colossians, Paul says about Jesus: **He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born over all creation, for in him all things were created...he is before all things, and all things hold together in him.** In Philippians it says that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth. It may be true that we are too quick to use the word great to describe people - athletes and actors and politicians - but Jesus truly is great. He is **the head over everything for the church.**

But Jesus’ greatness is not just a function of his power and majesty as true God. His greatness also has to do with his love for us. You know, no matter how much majesty Jesus has, if he had no regard for us, we would be very slow to acknowledge his greatness. But this is the Lord Jesus who said through his prophets: **I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.** And in another place he says: **In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you.**

In the end, the greatness of Jesus is seen most clearly in the salvation he has provided for us. He says: **Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.** In the book of Hebrews it says: **So for this reason he is able to save forever those who come to God through him, because he always lives to plead on their behalf.**

All this is to say that faith in Jesus is not misplaced. Jesus is the true and fitting object of our faith. May he give each of us also this **great faith** that says as the centurion and so many believers have: I am a great sinner, but Jesus is a great Savior. Amen.

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