

## **Community, Compassion and Inclusion**

July 5, 2026 Pentecost 6

Acts 10: 1-35

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Luke 7: 1-23

There is much in these passages of scriptures in our readings today that one could focus on. In the gospel readings, Jesus is travelling with a cohort of people following him as he is approached by friends of a Roman Centurion, seeking healing for a beloved slave; then they come across a funeral procession of a widow's son, and Jesus raises him from the dead. Finally, John the Baptist, who is in prison, hearing about Jesus' actions sends his disciples to ask him, whether he is the one, the Messiah proclaimed to come, or should they wait for another. John, like many others was expecting a different kind of messiah, one that would overthrow the Roman empire. Jesus tells the disciples to tell John what people see and hear: the blind can see; the lame walk, the sick are healed; the deaf hear; the dead are raised; the poor have good news brought to them. What was proclaimed at the beginning of Jesus' ministry when he read from Isaiah is coming true. In these readings three themes emerge that are important messages in the gospel: compassion, inclusion and community.

In the healing stories we witness Jesus' compassion for those he encounters. When Jesus sees the funeral procession of the widow burying her only son, we learn he was filled with compassion. He is moved by the situation and the suffering of this woman, who, as a widow would now have no means of income or support. Entering into her suffering, Jesus tells her not to cry, which may seem insensitive but in the context of the language he used, he is telling her not to give up hope, that all is not lost. He then makes himself unclean by touching the funeral stretcher the son is on and tells him to rise. He sits up, begins to speak, and the shocked crowd begin praising Jesus as a great prophet. The widow's life is turned around, and she has hope once again. This can be a difficult story for those who are grieving given resurrection is not very possible these days. The important

message here though for us, is that Jesus and God is with us in our suffering, in our joys and our sorrows. God meets us in our suffering and speaks a word of comfort in the midst of our struggles. We are not alone, and there is always hope and support for whatever we are going through.

Similarly, when Jesus is approached by some Jewish elders, friends of a Roman Centurion he does not hesitate to listen and go with them. Even though this soldier is a gentile, and a representative of Rome, the occupying empire, Jesus has compassion for his beloved, valued slave. When Jesus was close, friends of the soldier sent word that he was not worthy to have Jesus come to his house, but asked Jesus to say the word to let his servant be healed. Jesus, impressed with his faith, indicates to the crowd that he has not found such faith inside Israel, a profound and striking message to those listening. Jesus was open to listening to and helping a gentile, working for Rome, someone outside of the community he came for and he had compassion for him and the slave he loved. When have you experienced or witnessed such deep and loving compassion from someone or others in your life as Jesus exemplified in these two stories?

The Centurion offers an example of what genuine faith looks like. It's a decision you make, no matter what the circumstances of your life. Believing that God is utterly faithful, that God loves us no matter what, and that there is nothing that can separate us from that love, is a conviction you choose to believe. This kind of faith believes that God is always working in our lives for good purposes, to bring peace, and wholeness, and joy, and life to all of us. And when we believe in God in that way—with all our hearts—we can see the goodness and beauty and joy in the world, despite the tragedy and suffering.

There are strong themes of inclusion in this passage and the story in Acts. Not only does Jesus help the Roman Centurion who is a gentile, there are also strong indicators in the original text that the centurion was gay and the servant was his lover. The Greek word used in the original language, in Matthew's account to refer to the servant of the centurion is pais. In the

language of the time, pais had three possible meanings depending upon the context in which it was used. It could mean “son or boy;” it could mean “servant,” or it could mean a particular type of servant — one who was “his master’s male lover.” In the time and culture it was not uncommon to purchase someone to be your lover, just as marriages were arranged as a commercial transaction. The way the word ‘pais’ or boy was used in this passage, including how he was referred to as a valued slave of the centurion, it is likely that he was the soldiers’ lover. Jesus’ choice to help this gay soldier is another indicator of Jesus’ commitment to inclusion and widening the welcome of all into God’s community of love and compassion.

The Acts passage is a powerful message of the changing times in the church. The vision which Peter has, of God telling him to eat that which was previously considered unclean, connects with his visit to Cornelius, a gentile who was religious and god-fearing but not Jewish, who sent for Peter. Peter goes and enters the house even though it would have been improper for him to do so as a Jew. Both Peter and Cornelius listened to the Spirit, and met, with Peter naming his new understanding that God shows no partiality. After our reading for today ends, Peter shares the story of Jesus with Cornelius, and while he was speaking, the Holy Spirit filled those who were listening and all were baptised. The story is a message to the church that God includes those previously excluded. It is not only a message for then but also for now as we are continually expanding our understanding of what God shows no partiality means as we live out that God’s love includes all.

The third theme of these stories is one of community and the importance of the support of community when you are grieving or going through a hard time. The Centurion relied on his friends to find and speak to Jesus, and present his request for aid and healing. They connected him with Jesus, and led Jesus to him, his household. How often when we are going through tough times, do our friends, carry us, pray for us, support us, love us, keep us connected to God in Christ? Similarly, the widow was surrounded by her community as they processed to the gravesite. The key

is that the community needs to continue that support after the burial. Jesus knew that things would be difficult for the widow, and provided a way forward for her.

Compassion, Inclusion, Community, three important messages for us to consider and take with us from these stories today. May we live with compassion, standing with and supporting those who suffer. May we work to create communities of inclusion as we live out God's call to show no partiality and bear witness to God's love including all. And may we be a friend to offer support and faith to those who struggle and may we draw on our friends when we are struggling and grieving. May God's love sustain us and guide us through it all. Amen.