



THE CENTRAL PULPIT
CENTRAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH | ATLANTA, GEORGIA

GOD ON THE LOOSE

Luke 7:1-17

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June 6, 2010; the 10th Sunday in Ordinary Time

You have just heard two stories.

The first centers on a centurion. A Roman soldier. A commander accustomed to giving orders and having them obeyed. But in this story, a commanding centurion does not command. This Gentile seeks out the authority and power of a Jew named Jesus.

The second story centers on a Jewish widow living with no safety net. Having already buried her husband, this mourning mother is on her way to do what no parent should ever have to do, to bury her own child. As a devastated and disempowered woman, widow, and mourner, the last thing this woman expects is to encounter radical compassion from anyone, but she does in the person of Jesus.

Two stories.

One story leans into the future, anticipating another centurion, another Roman soldier, one named Cornelius whom we will meet in part two of Luke's Gospel. Like this Gentile centurion, Cornelius will be a bridge to a God's new world where faith is lived out by Jew and Gentile.

The other story reaches back to the day when prophets roamed the earth. Fleeing for his life from Queen Jezebel, Elijah lands in Zarephath, in the home of a widow and her son. First attacked by famine and then disease, the mother is about to join the chorus of mourners when Elijah calls upon the life restoring breath of God. First in Zarephath to a Gentile widow and now in Nain to a Jewish widow, Elijah and then Jesus restore life where death has settled in and then both stories say, "he gave him to his mother."

These two stories invite us to look back at the life-transforming power of God and to lean ahead into what God is doing and will do to turn our pedestrian and parochial faith on its head. When we are sure that the water in this font is reserved for only those like us, Luke will tell the story of Cornelius through whom Peter discovers God's surprising, wall-busting, all-embracing grace. When we are positive

that this table is reserved for only those like us, Luke will tell the story of Jesus who feeds Jew and Gentile alike with the compassion of his healing love.

We have heard two ancient stories from Luke, but what about our story?

Why are we here on this Sunday morning in June? That's easy enough for many of us to answer. Some are here to celebrate Henry Scigliano's baptism. Some are here to listen to Trace Haythorn kick-off our summer education series on worship. Some are here to meet with Marilyn Borst after worship to learn more about how Central can better connect with the global church. Some are here to fulfill responsibilities as elders and deacons to serve communion. Some are here because parents said we had to be here.

But beyond the curiosities and obligations, why are we here today? I can't help but wonder that we are here because something in Luke's two stories rings true. Is it possible that there really is something new and life-giving on the other side of the iron curtain of "that's just the way things are?" Is it possible that we have settled for a life that strips a little of our soul from us each day, or for a relationship that has long since lost any spark of love, or for a faith that is no more than a long list of things we do for God, because deep down inside we don't believe God can or will do anything for us?

One thing my colleague, Catherine, reminded me of early in her tenure at Central is something that Luke anticipates in his two stories today. For those who follow Jesus, every Sunday is Easter Sunday. That does not mean that death has gone on a holiday or that every story ends like these two in Luke's Gospel. Death still has its painful say, but for those who follow Jesus, death will never again have the last word.

And to add to Catherine's cogent observation, I would add that for those who follow Jesus, every Sunday is also Pentecost Sunday. The walls of culture, language, sexuality, ethnicity still stand and often seem impenetrable, but not one of them will finally withstand the divine gale blowing them to the ground.

We are here today to celebrate what Luke celebrates in both of these stories, a "God on the loose." In a sermon by the same title, New Testament scholar and Union Presbyterian Seminary president, Brian Blount writes: ". . . when Jesus sets God loose in it [the world] . . . it's a wild world out of religious, regulatory control, a world on the edge of time, a world that thinks the reign of God might break in at any moment, a world so sure that God is right around the corner that it stops thinking about standing in line and starts *lining* up the ways, all the ways the people in the world can think of to help each other. It's a world that cares more about purifying those who are sinners than *being* pure and separate *from* sinners. It's a world that cares more about touching and holding those who have dirtied themselves or have been dirtied by the situations of their lives than it cares about sweeping their churches and lives clean of anybody who's made mistakes. It's a world that would willingly and willfully break laws and customs that segregate people from each other, break laws that send people into unjust wars, break laws that allow the powerful and wealthy to have more opportunity in life than the weak and poor. . . . In such a world you either go with the man and help him create the holy chaos he's creating or you find a way to do everything you can to stop him so you can get your people back in line" (Blount and Charles, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, p. 33).

If Luke and Brian are right, you and I are here because we need each other to trust that God is on the loose, that the promise of new life is not a divine parlor trick, a fantasy preserved by Luke in these two stories, but what God has always and is always bringing about and inviting us to live into that holy vision.

That, I pray, is why every last one of us is here.

AMEN.