

Virtual Healing
Psalm 96; Luke 7:1-11
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Introduction: Our sermon today is from the Gospel according to Luke. It comes right after Luke's version of beatitudes. Jesus has traveled to Capernaum, where you can still see the foundation for the ancient synagogue. You are going to hear about a centurion, who would have had 100 soldiers at his command. He could have worked for the Romans or Pontius Pilate or the Herod Antipas. Regardless, he was a powerful man and not a Jew.

When we hear that his highly valued slave was sick, we might take that at face value, but a highly valued slave was probably a faithful servant who accompanied his master, everywhere even into war. This slave would have been a beloved companion to the centurion.

The centurion didn't bring his request for help to Jesus himself. Jewish elders brought the request, explaining that the centurion was good to the Jews.

The second group of people that the Centurion sends is his own people – Gentiles. This contrast foretells of Jesus' ministry to not just the Jewish people, but to Gentiles as well.

Another critically important thing to note is that this is the only healing story in Luke where Jesus is not present with the sick person when He heals them.

Luke 7:1-10

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ²A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. ³When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave.

⁴When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, ⁵for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us."

⁶And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; ⁷therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it."

⁹When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." ¹⁰When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

Prayer: Almighty God, in you are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Open our eyes that we may see the wonders of your Word; and give us grace that we may clearly understand and freely choose the way of your wisdom; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

"Virtual Healing." That's a strange sounding idea, isn't it? "Virtual Healing." What can that mean? Actually virtual healing is a process that is being used to help soldiers suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The case could also be made that the centurion used virtual reality to invite Jesus to heal his slave. And Jesus used virtual healing to save the slave.

In virtual treatment for PTSD, the patient is immersed in a virtual combat setting, complete with the sounds of gunfire and explosions, the sight of people in the streets, and even the smells of the battlefield, like burning rubber, cordite from spent shells, and rotting garbage on the street.

As explained in Homiletics Online,

Before entering the virtual battlefield, the veteran recounts his or her experiences to a therapist and discusses whether he or she is ready to deal with them. When the veteran is ready, the therapist fits him or her with virtual reality goggles and earphones and gives the veteran eight exposures to the scene of their trauma -- a buddy getting hit by a grenade, for example. The scene is played out in detail, including all the associated sights, sounds and smells. The more the veteran can recount the event and talk about it after each session, the less deep the trauma is buried in the veteran's psyche and the more likely he or she is able to be freed from its grip. As one soldier put it after going through the therapy, "The war will never leave me, but now I know I can handle it." The treatment has produced some hopeful results. A recent study revealed that 12 of 15 veterans who underwent the treatment over 12 weeks no longer met the criteria for PTSD.

In a way, the centurion created the opportunity for virtual healing. He knew that Jesus didn't actually have to be present with the slave to heal him. As an officer in the Roman army, he knew how to use power. With only his words, he could command his soldiers to come or go or do this or that. He understood power and he recognized power in Jesus. He heard that Jesus was in town and knew Jesus' reputation as a healer.

But with Jesus no longer walking in the world, how can we experience healing? We don't always see or recognize the virtual healing that the Holy Spirit gives, but I know a way that we can see virtual healing. Through the Holy Spirit, we can be virtual healers. Does that sound scary? I hope not. After all we have been healing people for more than fifty years, right here at Geneva.

There's that story I keep repeating about Dotty Renoe. She was with a friend who had many children, as Dotty did. One day her friend asked her which Catholic Church she attended. When Dotty explained that she was a Presbyterian and attended Geneva, her friend said, "Oh, I know that church. That's the church that takes care of each other!"

Today is Memorial Sunday and it seems natural that we talk a little more about those who have served our country. As I mentioned earlier, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is devastating our returning heroes. Just this week I saw a writer named Sebastian Junger interviewed on CNN. Junger has written a book called *Tribe*. He explains:

We have a strong instinct to belong to small groups defined by clear purpose and understanding, "tribes." This tribal connection has been largely lost in modern society, but regaining it may be the key to our psychological survival.

Decades before the American Revolution, Benjamin Franklin lamented that English settlers were constantly fleeing over to the Indians, but Indians almost never did the same. Tribal society has been exerting an almost gravitational pull on Westerners for hundreds of years, and the reason lies deep in our evolutionary past as a communal species. The most recent example of that attraction is combat veterans who come home to find themselves missing the incredibly intimate bonds of platoon life. The loss of closeness that comes at the end of deployment may explain the high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder suffered by military veterans today.

Combining history, psychology, and anthropology, *Tribe* explores what we can learn from tribal societies about loyalty, belonging, and the eternal human quest for meaning. It explains the irony that for many veterans as well as civilians, war feels better than peace, adversity can turn out to be a blessing, and disasters are sometimes remembered more fondly than weddings or tropical vacations. *Tribe* explains why we are stronger when we come together, and how that can be achieved even in today's divided world. [Sebastian Junger, *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, May 24, 2016, Amazon quote from the book]

The more I think about the idea of tribes, the more convinced I am that we are called to be a tribe. Through the Holy Spirit, we are called to be the body of Christ. We belong to a tribe of Christians.

Like the centurion, we know that we can't heal sickness, but sometimes we can be part of the healing.

At the Presbytery meeting on Tuesday, we had an outstanding guest preacher named Dr. Rodger Nishioka, who worked at Columbia Seminary for 15 years primarily studying young adults and faith. Not long ago he was doing research on those in their late

20s and 30s who had been raised in the Presbyterian Church. He gathered a group of seven or eight of these young people and the first thing he did was to ask, "Are any of you active in church today?" Looking around the room, he was surprised when a couple raised their hands.

He said, "You know you are in the minority. Can you explain why you are active in a Presbyterian Church?"

Here's the story: This young couple had grown up in New Jersey, went to college, began their careers and got married, but they didn't join a church. A few years later, companies in the same Nebraska city pursued them both. They decided, "Why not?" So they moved. They visited one church a couple of times, but didn't sign the register and didn't go back.

One day, the young wife felt a small lump on her breast. She called her mother who encouraged her to go have it checked out, but it was probably nothing since she was young and healthy. She went to the doctor who sent her to a surgeon, who said it would be good to check, but it probably was nothing.

After the procedure, the doctor called and said he needed to meet with them. In his office, he said, "I am very sorry to have to tell you, but you have Stage 4 breast cancer that has surely metastasized." And so it began.

They worked out a calendar of when different family members could come to help over the intense treatment plan, which began with surgery and was followed with a heavy schedule of chemotherapy.

When she checked in at the hospital, they asked what faith tradition she practiced. She said Presbyterian, but when they asked which church, she had no answer.

Everything was ready, her family had come, and she was about to be wheeled into surgery when the pastor of the church they had attended twice appeared. He was gracious and led them in prayer. While the family waited, he stayed with them – the whole time.

She was in the hospital for a few days, and the pastor came back to see her. He was very comforting in a worrisome situation.

When she went home, she was still worn out. The next day her husband said that he really did need to check in at work and she encouraged him to go; she would sleep, but as she drifted off, there was a knock at the door. It was a persistent knock...knock...knock...knock. Finally she eased herself out of bed and made her way to the front door. There was a woman with food. The young woman was confused. The woman with the food double-checked and said that the food was for her and her husband.

"We didn't order it. How much does it cost?" The visitor said there was no charge; it was from the church. Then the woman asked if she could come in and put the food up.

After that, she asked if the young woman would like to talk. Hesitatingly, the young woman said, "Yes..." They sat down on the couch and had a nice little talk. Then the older woman suggested it was time for the young woman to get back into bed, but before she left, she asked if she might do a little dusting, explaining, "When you are sick, you just don't have time or energy to clean." Again, the young woman asked, "How much does it cost?"

"Dear, it doesn't cost a thing. We are the church. This is what we do."

When the husband got home, he couldn't believe how clean the house was. He ran upstairs asking, "Honey, did you feel good enough to clean and cook?" His wife explained and his first question was, "How much did it cost?"

The next day, someone came knocking again. Pushing herself out of bed, she found a man at the door with food. He introduced himself, explaining that he was from the church. He needed to come in and go over the directions for heating the food since his wife "Would kill him if it were burned!" Again, the young woman asked, "How much does it cost?" He explained that it was from the church and this is what the church does."

As he was leaving, he mentioned that he noticed that the screen door wasn't working properly. He had some tools in his car and would be glad to fix it. She said her husband had meant to do it but with all the things going on he just didn't have a chance. Then she asked, "How much will it cost to fix it?" Of course, it didn't cost.

When her husband came home, he was surprised by the fixed screen door and when she explained that a man from the church had fixed it, he said, "How much did it cost?"

The church stood with that couple through a long year of treatment. The wife said, "I don't know how long I have, but I'm not leaving this church until I go in a pine box!"

Dr. Nishioka said he had to see that church. He flew out to Nebraska and guess what the congregation looked like? It looked a lot like Geneva, plenty of grey and white hair, a smattering of younger folks.

I believe that Jesus specializes in virtual healing using churches like ours. Our hands become the invisible hands of God, and the Holy Spirit energizes our tribe so that we can do the work of the Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ. What a joy to be a part of virtual healing. Amen.