



Central Peninsula Church

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Luke 7:1-17
Mark Mitchell
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Just Say the Word

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

Sometimes distance is a good thing. In the game of golf or in track and field, it's usually a good thing. But in human relationships it's usually a sign that something is wrong.

In the movie *Home Alone*, a family plans a European vacation for Christmas. The relatives all arrive for the big event, but the youngest son is feeling distant from the family. As the family gets ready for the trip, he finds himself being ignored, and so he acts out and gets in trouble. He's sent to a room in the attic. While he's there, his temper flares and he wishes that his family and everyone else would just go away so he could be all alone. The next thing you know, in a rather bizarre plot twist, the family overlooks the little boy in the attic, leaves for the airport, and gets on the plane, all the while thinking he is with them. When the boy wakes up in the morning, he discovers no one is there, and he figures his wish has been granted. At first he's delighted in the distance between he and his family. He has full run of the house. He eats all the junk food he wants, watches whatever movies he wants, sleeps wherever he wants, and doesn't have to answer to anyone. But then burglars try to break into the house and he finds himself having to defend his castle. He actually does a pretty good job of it, but eventually he tires of the distance between him and his family.

That's a story about distance. We experience distance in lots of ways. We can live in the same house with someone but feel emotionally distant from them. We can also be separated from someone by thousands of miles, yet feel a bond with them, and long for that distance to be gone. One way or another, distance is something to be overcome.

We can also experience distance from God. We know that sin distances us from God. When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden they felt that distance and when God came looking for them, they hid. The writer of Hebrews talks about Christ as a High Priest who is **"holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted in the heavens"** (Heb. 7:26).

Many things can distance us from God. Circumstances can distance us from God. If you know anything about the life of King David you know that. David spent several years being hunted down like a rabbit by half-crazed King Saul. There were times when David felt like God was as far away as the stars. In one of the poems he wrote during that time, he cried out, **"Why do**

you stand afar off, O Lord? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (Ps.10:1).

For some people this is why they fear death. For some, death is all about distance. Distance from loved ones. Distance from God. Death might be the ultimate form of distance, the one that can't be crossed.

This morning we look at two stories from the life of Jesus that deal with this issue of distance. We encounter people in these stories who for one reason or another might have been distant from Jesus, but in fact that distance was somehow overcome. How was it overcome? How will it be overcome for us?

In the first story Jesus has just finished the sermon on the mount and returned to Capernaum.

I. Jesus heals a centurion's son.

"When He had completed all His discourse in the hearing of the people, He went to Capernaum. And a centurion's slave, who was highly regarded by him, was sick and about to die. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders asking Him to come and save the life of his slave. When they came to Jesus, they earnestly implored Him, saying, 'He is worthy for You to grant this to him; for he loves our nation and it was he who built us our synagogue'" (Luke 7:1-5).

Here is a man who in many ways is distant from Jesus. He's distant geographically. Although he might have lived in that very city of Capernaum, as far as we can see, he never comes into direct contact with Jesus. He's always communicating with Jesus through someone else. He's also distant religiously. This man was a gentile. Deep within the psyche of every Jew was a sense of the need to be separate from gentiles for fear of losing their distinctiveness as God's chosen people. In Jesus' day this became so acute that the historian Tacitus said of the Jews, "They regard the rest of mankind with all the hatred of enemies." There was also the cultural distance between this man and Jesus. He was a centurion. He was like a modern day army Captain in the Roman army. He probably commanded about 100 soldiers. On the basis of past service or outstanding merit, Herod would have appointed this centurion from the ranks of the lesser officers. It often took 15 to 20 years for a soldier to work his way up to centurion rank. Centurions received double the pay of the other soldiers. In many ways, this man was worlds apart from this small town carpenter.

But here an attempt is made to overcome the distance. As is so often the case, this was precipitated by a crisis. One of his own slaves was sick and about to die. Now that might not have seemed like that big of a deal. Death was commonplace in the ancient world. Life expectancy didn't even extend to what we consider mid-life. But notice this slave was "highly regarded" by the centurion. That says a lot about the centurion. He was humane. He viewed his slave as more than a tool. And so he sends to Jesus for help. Jesus had spent a lot of time in Capernaum. He had healed many people there. No doubt the centurion had heard and perhaps even seen enough that he's confident Jesus can help.

But he doesn't go directly to Jesus. He sends some Jewish elders to him. Since Jesus is a Jew, he believes these Jews can best intercede for him. He's looking for them to build a bridge between them. Now you would think that these Jewish elders wouldn't take to kindly to running errands for this gentile soldier, but this was no ordinary gentile! Look what they do: they "earnestly implored" Jesus on his behalf. And look what they say about him: "He is worthy for you to grant this to him; for he loves our nation and it was he who built our synagogue." So not only is this man humane, he's generous and he has an affinity for the Jewish nation as a whole. In those days there was a category of people the Jews called "God-fearers" – someone who accepted the Jewish God but declined to actually become a proselyte to Judaism. Notice HOW these Jews are trying to bridge the distance: he is worthy; he deserves to be helped. And it seems that Jesus buys it because Luke says he starts off with them.

"Now Jesus started on His way with them; and when He was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to Him, 'Lord, do not trouble Yourself further, for I am not worthy for You to come under my roof; for this reason I did not even consider myself worthy to come to You, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man placed under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, "Go!" and he goes, and to another, "Come!" and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this!" and he does it'" (vv. 6–8).

While Jesus was on his way, it seems the centurion had some second thoughts about how this was playing out. He probably recalled that a devout Jew like Jesus might have scruples about entering the home of a gentile. In the book of Acts, Luke tells another story about a centurion named Cornelius. Peter went to Cornelius' home and when he got there the first thing he said was, **"You know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a**

foreigner or to visit him..." (Acts 10:28). Perhaps that's why this centurion sends another delegation, this time a group of his own friends, to meet Jesus. Notice how his own estimate of himself is quite different than that of the Jewish elders. Twice he says he's NOT worthy. He's not worthy for Jesus to come into his home. And he's not worthy to even come out and meet Jesus face to face. We've seen how Jesus taught that we should take the log out of our own eye before we try to remove the speck from our brother's eye. It appears that this man understood that. He judged himself; he saw himself as he truly was. He understood that the distance between he and Jesus wouldn't be bridged by his own good deeds.

That's often how we try to do it, isn't it? We try to close the distance between us and God by trying to be worthy. We can go to church and read the Bible and feed the poor and smile at the grocery clerk...all in an attempt to feel worthy of God's favor. But this centurion knew that was futile.

He understood something else as well. He understood how authority works. Notice he starts out, "For I also am a man placed under authority..." And as a man under authority, he was able to exercise authority. Because he was under authority, he had the authority to give orders, which others immediately obeyed. He says, "Jesus, you and I are alike that way. You're under authority, the ultimate authority, and therefore you're in authority. So, Jesus, *just say the word*, and my servant will be healed." By the way, he's right. Over and over again, Jesus affirmed that he placed himself under his Father's authority and that was the secret of his own authority. On one occasion he said, "I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me... And this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day." He was under authority and therefore he had authority. A great insight from a Roman soldier!

Look how Jesus responds. **"Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled at him, and turned and said to the crowd that was following Him, 'I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith.' When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health"** (vv. 9–10). Only one other time does Jesus marvel at something. He marveled at the lack of faith of the people in his own hometown (Mark 6:6). But here he marvels at the faith of this centurion. Jesus seldom marvels at anything, but when he does marvel, it's about faith. Here it's faith of a kind not even found in Israel. What kind of faith is this? It's faith that *with Jesus distance doesn't matter*. It's faith that the power of Jesus' word is so great that he doesn't have to even be there to heal. Just say the word and it's done. In a sense, he doesn't have to be there to be there. They went back to the house and they saw that he had been there but he hadn't been there. Despite the distance, and because of the power of his word, the slave is

healed.

What is it that overcomes physical distance and religious distance and cultural distance? What is it that overcomes the distance we experience from God because of sin and or bitter circumstances? It's faith; faith that with Jesus distance doesn't matter. He doesn't have to be there to be there; he's present in the power of his word. His word can heal and forgive.

Perhaps the ultimate form of distance is death. When you think about it, that's what we really fear about death. We fear that it means distance from our loved ones. Will we ever see them again? The bright glow of their smile? Will we ever feel their warm embrace? Will we ever know them the way we've known them? We fear that death will mean distance from God as well. This week we've watched Catholics all over the world praying for the Pope. Why are they praying? Because they teach that when a believer dies, even though he might ultimately be saved, he goes to purgatory to pay a penalty. If, by acts of penitence, he's fully paid this penalty in the present life, on dying he goes straight to heaven. But if he's partially paid the penalty, he pays the rest of it in purgatory. Catholics believe that souls in purgatory can be helped, and their term there shortened, by praying for them. It's a misguided attempt to deal with the distance.

In the next story Jesus deals with the distance of death in another way.

II. Jesus raises the widow's son.

“Soon afterwards He went to a city called Nain; and His disciples were going along with Him, accompanied by a large crowd. Now as He approached the gate of the city, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; and a sizable crowd from the city was with her” (vv. 11–12).

The trip to Nain wouldn't have taken more than a day; it lay a few miles to the southeast of Jesus' hometown, Nazareth. Jesus goes there with his twelve disciples along with a large crowd. Just outside the city gates of Nain they run into another crowd of people. At the front of the procession is a woman. Here we have a woman who is distanced from Jesus in another way. She's distanced by her own situation, her own circumstances. She's a widow and widows had it difficult in those days, not just emotionally, but just to make ends meet. They were completely dependent on their children to support them. To make matters worse, her son had just died; her only son. Jewish burials took place the same day of the death, so she's still reeling from the shock of her loss. Despite the crowd of mourners around her, she must have felt utterly alone in the world. Like David, she must have prayed: **“Why do you stand afar off, O Lord? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?”** (Ps. 10:1).

There are some people who have to endure things that from a human standpoint are really impossible to

endure. The loss of a child is perhaps the worst of all things to endure. Joe Bayly knew what the loss of a child was like. He and his wife lost not just one son, but three sons; one at 18 days, after surgery; another at 5 years, from leukemia; and a third at 18 years old, after a sledding accident. He wrote about it in a book called, *The View From the Hearse*. “Of all deaths,” he writes, “that of a child is most unnatural and hardest to bear. In Carl Jung's words, it is ‘a period placed before the end of the sentence,’ sometimes when the sentence has hardly begun. We expect the old to die. We expected my mother to die. She was 91, and God was merciful. The separation is always difficult, but it comes as no surprise. But the child, the youth? Life lies ahead, with its beauty, its wonder, its potential. Death is a cruel thief when it strikes down the young.”

The death of a child is one of the greatest agonies possible in this life; like burying a part of yourself. Some of you know that – you've been through that. It's a burden that all parents fear. That's what Jesus met up with when he encountered this woman.

But there is another person in this story who is distanced from Jesus. The boy is dead. As I said, that might be the ultimate form of distance. How do you bring a dead person near? How do you build a bridge to that? The Jews even had laws about dead bodies and the things associated with them. No one could touch the body. No one could touch the wrappings which wound around his body or the palate upon which he lay. If they did they would be rendered unclean.

But Jesus overcomes again. Look how Luke describes what happened next. Notice how Jesus overcomes the distance.

“When the Lord saw her, He felt compassion for her, and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’ And He came up and touched the coffin; and the bearers came to a halt. And He said, ‘Young man, I say to you, arise!’ The dead man sat up and began to speak. And Jesus gave him back to his mother” (vv. 13–15).

First, he sees the woman and he feels compassion for her. Sometimes we don't really see those in pain; we don't want to see them. But Jesus sees this woman. And his heart goes out to her. Luke uses a word that expresses an emotion so deep it has a physical effect. Whatever it is we have to go through, Jesus' heart is big enough for our sorrows. Scripture says, **“His compassions never fail. They are new every morning.”** (Lam. 3:22-23). You might have such immense hurt that you cannot even give voice to it, but he understands. He reads your heart and his heart goes out to you.

Jesus breaks the awkward silence and says to her, “Do not weep.” These are tender, soothing words that come out of concern. He's not telling her to grit her

teeth and suppress her emotion, but he was expressing genuine care and hinting at what he was about to do.

But that's not all. He then moves forward and touches the coffin. He renders himself unclean. In doing so, he stops everything. It's like life and death stood still – face to face. And then Jesus speaks. The strange thing is that now he speaks to the boy. Now let's face it, this is a little spooky. But it's consistent with what Jesus did on other occasions. There are three incidents where Jesus raised the dead. In each of them, Jesus spoke to the dead as if they could hear him. To the twelve year old daughter of Jairus, he said, "Little lamb, arise!" To Lazarus, he said, "Lazarus, come forth!" And now to this young man, "Young man, I say to you, arise." The really astounding thing is that in each case, they heard him and they obeyed him. His word goes the distance, even into death. This boy sits up and starts to jabber. "Boy, I was conked out! Mom, what are we doing out here? Why am I on this stretcher? Who is that man?"

Luke adds one more beautiful touch. He says, "And Jesus gave him back to his mother." His word reaches into the distant, dark night of death and brings this young man to life. And then Jesus closes death's distance between this grieving mother and her only son. He overcomes the distance of death.

And the crowd? Luke reports: **"Fear gripped them all, and they began glorifying God, saying, 'A great prophet has arisen among us!' and, 'God has visited His people!' This report concerning Him went out all over Judea and in all the surrounding district"** (vv. 16–17).

The crowd responds with awe and praise. The news spread, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" They couldn't help but think back to the prophet Elijah who raised a widow's son from the dead just like this, and gave him back to his mother just like this. But he was more than a prophet. "God has visited his people!" The one they thought was distant has come near!

Some of us say, "Well, if I could see him raise a young man from the dead, I would say the same thing." But the Scripture says that this is but a picture of what he will do in the future. Paul writes, **"For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever"** (1 Thes. 4:16-18 NIV).

Do you fear death? For yourself? For your loved ones? Do you fear the distance between you and God or you and the ones you love? Did you hear what the Scripture says? We will be caught up *together with them* in the clouds. No more distance. We will be together with them. And we will *with the Lord forever*.

CONCLUSION

You might be going through a time where you feel distant from God. Perhaps it's the pain of trying circumstances. Perhaps it's the consciousness you have of some sin in your life that strangles you with guilt and keeps you feeling distant. You don't feel worthy. Perhaps it's some cultural or racial barrier that makes you feel that you just don't belong among the followers of Christ. Perhaps it's the reality of death and just the fear of being separated from the ones you love. God speaks through these two stories and he says that it's these very things that he uses in our life to draw us near. If the centurion's slave had never gotten sick; if this woman's son had never died; they might have never known what it meant to be close to Jesus. It's through these things that we come to know the power of his word. He is not here but he is here. And his word is so powerful that all he has to do is say the word and we will see the power of his presence. And it's through these things that we come to know the depth of his compassion. Because of his compassion he sees us, he identifies with us in such a way that he is willing to become unclean on our behalf, and he gives back to us that which we thought we have lost forever.