

Luke 7:1 -10

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[0 : 0 0] If we read Luke chapter 7 and consider it this morning, I just want to very briefly make reference and inform concerning the General Assembly that concluded this past week. And for those of you who perhaps are visiting with us, this will be of only very fleeting interest, if of any interest, so bear with me for what will be just a very brief words in this regard. And having said what I have to say, that will actually lead us in to our sermon this morning. So as I say, this past week, the General Assembly of our denomination met in Edinburgh, and among other matters dealt with, there were a number of petitions concerning decisions taken at the Plenary Assembly held in November of last year. And many of you are familiar and aware of what I'm talking about.

In November, the Plenary Assembly enacted legislation that delegated to local church sessions the responsibility to determine within certain parameters the matter of sung praise at worship services, both the materials of praise and the matter of instrumental accompaniment. And the Plenary Assembly in November took the view that this decision did not require to be sent down to presbyteries under the Barrier Act. Now the petitions presented last week were largely concerned with requesting that the General Assembly reverse the decision of the Plenary Assembly concerning the non-applicability of the Barrier Act. And if they had been granted, if the petitions had been granted, would have involved effectively suspending last year's decision and requiring that presbyteries now consider whether they wish to support or not the decision of the Plenary Assembly. Last week's General Assembly, by a very large majority, rejected the crave of the petitions and affirmed in a clear and unequivocal manner that the decisions taken at the Plenary Assembly stand. Now nobody is required to agree with the decision of the General Assembly. We have liberty of conscience to agree or disagree with the decision, but all are required to accept that it represents the decision of the broadest court of the church with the authority and the responsibility to determine on these matters. And so, as a consequence, this matter is now closed. Now, in reference to that, the Reverend John Ross, known to many of us, a missionary of our church serving in South Africa, the Dumasani Theological Institute, posted on Facebook on Monday in relation to the decisions that I've just been commenting on. And he stated as follows, Now, let's set that behind us and press on to win Scotland and the world for Jesus. Well, to win Scotland is a stirring sentiment, and I am persuaded a worthy and God-honoring sentiment. But worthy and stirring though it is, is it achievable to win Scotland, is it achievable to win Scotland? They're grand words, but is it really something that we can do? Can we win Scotland? Does the evidence not rather suggest that the battle is being lost? What more eloquent evidence, and by no means the only evidence, and I don't want to highlight this evidence beyond or above many other evidences, but eloquent evidence nonetheless of the battle being lost are some of the events that took place at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, what we commonly describe as our national church. And we grieve, or we certainly ought to grieve, at the path taken by the national church. It was solemnly illustrated by one speaker in the recent debate, and I make reference to this in the intimation sheet, who having ridiculed a number of supposed biblical horror stories, concluded, and I quote, we have to reject the stuff in the Bible because we know better. We know better. What's quite astonishing pride and pomposity. But getting back to the question that concerns us and that should concern us, can we really win Scotland? Is it achievable? What resources do we require, both spiritual and material? Where do we start in even thinking about such a task? I would like to suggest that the starting point is love. Do we love Jesus enough to win Scotland for Jesus and the glory of His name? That surely is the first question, even in relation to the question of love. Do we love Jesus enough? And so I pose the question to myself and to you. But also we can ask, do we love Scotland enough? Do we love Scotland enough to desire that she be brought to know the saving grace and loveliness of our Savior, Jesus Christ? And this morning I want to

consider this matter of love for Scotland, love for our nation, or certainly the nation where God has placed us.

Our backgrounds may be different, our countries of origin may be different, but in God's providence we are all here. We are all placed in this nation. How are we to love our nation? What can we learn concerning this matter of love for our nation? And the lessons that we will learn are lessons that we will learn from a patriot. A patriot described for us in the gospel of Luke, a man who loved the nation he was part of. We have read the passage in Luke chapter 7, and we can remind ourselves there simply of one thing that is said concerning this man in verse 4 of Luke chapter 7. When they came to Jesus, the elders of the Jew, when they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, this man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation. Because he loves our nation.

[7 : 01] This description of the man is not his own description. He doesn't make that claim for himself. It is the testimony of others, very particularly those described in the passage as the elders of the Jews. They describe him in this way. They commend this man in this particular way, that he loves our nations. And what can we say about this love? This morning I want to highlight four aspects of the love that this man bore for the nation where God had placed him.

And the four aspects that I want us to consider together this morning are as follows. First of all, this love, this love for the nation, this love for the nation of Israel where he was placed. This love, first of all, was born of a conscious decision. And we'll look at that in a moment, born of a conscious decision.

But secondly, this love was demonstrated in concrete action. In the third place, we will notice that this love was directed to the most unlikely. And then finally, that this love was married to faith in Jesus Christ.

Christ. These four aspects that I want us to think about and consider this morning. First of all, this man's love, the centurion's love for the nation was born of a conscious decision. Who was this man?

Well, he was a foreigner. He was a centurion. He was engaged in duties, commended by the imperial power, forcibly occupying Israel. He was no doubt a small but significant cog in the despised machinery of occupation and oppression. He was a Roman centurion. He may not have hailed for Rome. He may have been part of the extended empire, but he was certainly a foreigner in the land of Israel. This man had not been born in Palestine. His presence in Palestine was not the product of his own choice or preference. Indeed, his presence was unlikely to be a permanent one. And yet, he loved the nation. His love was not genetic.

[9 : 36] He wasn't born loving the nation. It was not hereditary. It was not something that he had received from his parents or grandparents. His love for the nation was not informed by a sense of duty or cultivated by his peers who would encourage fellow citizens to love their nation. None of these things.

This man decided to love Israel. It was a surprising decision. It was a shocking decision in many ways, but it was a conscious decision on his part. We don't know all the factors that influenced him or motivated him to take that decision. But the point is, it was a conscious decision on his part. He decided to love Israel. He chose to love Israel. His was a considered and conscious love. It reminds me of a free church missionary teacher in Peru. And I may well have shared this story with you before.

Petrina Macrosti. We're going back several decades now. And she served in the mission field in Peru as a missionary teacher. And she decided to do something that very few missionaries certainly on that particular field ever chose to do. She decided to retire to Peru and live out her days in Peru. Indeed, she went further and she chose to take out Peruvian citizenship. And when she was visited in her home and retired and aged, often visited by former pupils that she had taught in Colegio San Andres, she would proudly display her Peruvian ID card to her guests. And then she would declare to them that she was more Peruvian than they were.

Now, this caused a measure of puzzlement to her visitors who were born and brought up in Peru. And to their puzzlement at her audacious claim, she would explain along these lines, you are Peruvian because you were born in Peru. But I am Peruvian because I chose to be a Peruvian. And she considered herself much more Peruvian for that reason. And that is a little bit of what we're saying about the centurion. You see, he loved the nation he was part of, not through any sense of duty, not through any obligation, not because he was required or expected to. He loved the nation he was part of where God had placed him because he chose to love this nation. And that is a

challenge for us.

[12 : 22] We perhaps have more reason to love this nation where God has placed us. Many of us were born here. Many of us can go back generations and identify our Scottish heritage. For some, this is not the case.

But we can learn from this man, this man who chose to love. Love is something you choose to do. And we must consciously choose to love Scotland. If we are to win Scotland, then we must love Scotland, even and perhaps especially when it is distinctly unlovable. That's the first thing I want you to notice about this man, or particularly the love of this man. It was born of a conscious decision.

But the second thing that we find in the passage that we've read is that it was demonstrated, this love was demonstrated in concrete action. All that we're saying really revolves around the words of the elders of the Jews, he loves our nation. That was the opinion of those who knew him. And it is a very striking and we might even say shocking opinion for the elders of the Jews to hold. That they would be willing to acknowledge that this despised Roman centurion, or certainly the power that he represented was despised, that they should affirm that this man loves our nation. And it rather begs the question, what is the evidence for this intriguing conclusion that they come to? How do they come to this conclusion? How can they say such a thing that he loves the nation? Well, we're told the basis for their conclusion. It's mentioned very clearly. They themselves explain why it is they have come to this conclusion. We read there in verse 4, this man deserves to have you do this because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue. See, this is the evidence. The evidence of his love was concrete action. It wasn't simply that he declared love for the nation. It wasn't simply that he was capable of flowery speeches on suitable occasions declaring what a wonderful nation it was. No, the evidence for his love was concrete action. It was something he had done. He had built their synagogue. This is the evidence.

And this concrete action demonstrating his love reveals certain characteristics of the nature of his love for the nation. It was a selfless love. I suppose you could argue that love in its very nature as it ought to be is selfless. Well, certainly it was selfless in regard to this man. The power that he enjoyed was such that he could have and perhaps would have been expected to secure personal profit.

At the expense of others. He had authority. He had power. He could have very well used that power for personal gain. But this man, it would seem, was not concerned to secure that personal profit at the cost of others. He wasn't concerned with how much he could suck out of his Palestinian posting, but rather his concern was what could he do for his adopted home.

[15 : 50] And so I ask of myself and I ask of us all, what about us? What is it that we do to demonstrate a professed love for our nation? Rather reminded of those very well known words of the late President Kennedy, something along the lines of, ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country. This love of the centurion demonstrated in concrete action was selfless love. It was costly love. The suggestion seems to be, we can't state this categorically, we don't have sufficient information, but the suggestion seems to be that this man was the sole or certainly principal benefactor for the construction of the synagogue. He loves our nation and has built our synagogue. As I say, at the very least, he would appear to have been the principal benefactor in this very significant project.

So what we have here is not some symbolic gesture to garner favor with the locals, but this man giving generously and sacrificially to secure the construction of the synagogue for the benefit of his neighbors, for the benefit of the good people of Capernaum where he had made his home. It was costly love that he demonstrated in concrete action. But I think we can say something else about this love. We can describe it as wise love. Now what is wise love? Well, wise love is not in the first instance sentimental, not that there's anything wrong with the sentimental aspect of love, but wise love is rather love that seeks the best for the other. And what better way to seek the best for the good people of Capernaum than to provide them with a synagogue. If we just pause for a moment and realize just what a synagogue was for, and then we will better appreciate what a wonderful gift this was that the centurion gave to the people of Capernaum. Well, the synagogue in the first instance was a place, a space for the worship of God, where the inhabitants, the citizens of Capernaum could gather to worship God, to hear His Word read, to pray to God.

But that was not all that a synagogue was for. A synagogue was also, and we shouldn't really divorce these two aspects because they're intertwined, but it was also a space for the education of the young. It was a kind of school as well as a church, if we can use the language we would use. It combined those two functions of worship and education, certainly God honoring education, education grounded in the Word of God. And so we see that the wise love of the centurion is concerned with facilitating, with encouraging, with providing the citizens of Capernaum a place where they could worship God and where their young could be taught and instructed in the ways and in the Word of God. What greater gift could He possibly have given to them?

It was wise love that He was given to us. It was wise love that He demonstrates in this concrete action of providing the synagogue for them. And as we think of ourselves, and as we would seek to draw lessons from this man, see it's not difficult for us to verbally declare that we love Scotland.

[19 : 29] It's not difficult for us to verbally declare our allegiance to Scotland. We might, if we wish, if we're interested in doing these kind of things, we could head to Hamden and stand on the terraces and sing until we were without a voice.

Singing on our national football team, or in so many other symbolic ways, declare our love for Scotland. And declare our love perhaps bringing it closer to home, to the city where God has placed us here in Aberdeen.

The question that we have to ask ourselves is what concrete actions demonstrate that we do indeed love our nation? Can you think of any for yourself? First of all, individually, can you think of any concrete action?

You could say, well, this demonstrates that I do really love Scotland. I leave that with you for you to ponder on. But let's think of ourselves as a congregation. Do we love Scotland? Do we love the city where God has placed us?

What concrete actions are there to demonstrate that we do? And very particularly following the lead of the centurion, what concrete actions to promote the worship of God among our neighbors?

[20 : 44] What concrete actions to provide for God-honoring education for the young of our city?

Could we perhaps, as we consider the challenge of this man, could we even explore, at least begin by exploring, joining with others who are like-minded in providing Christian education for our young?

Some might say, well, it's too costly, it's too big a project, it's just beyond our means. Well, building a synagogue was no picnic, but that did not deter the centurion. Love doesn't look at the price tag and be put off by it.

So, this man's love was born of a conscious decision. It was demonstrated in concrete action. But thirdly, it was directed to the most unlikely.

The evidence for the centurion's love provided by the elders concerned the building of the synagogue. But more telling, if less dramatic evidence, is provided by his concern for his servant, which is really what the story is all about.

You see, the best evidence for loving Israel was loving Israelites. That's the best evidence. If you say you love a nation, the best evidence that that is so is love for the citizens of that nation.

[22 : 10] And in the case of the centurion, it was the most unexpected of Israelites that he showered his love upon. His servant, his slave, this insignificant slave in his household, certainly in the opinion of his peers, certainly in the opinion of those who enjoyed his social class, a servant, a slave, was the most insignificant of people.

And yet, it is for this slave that the centurion shows such love. And if we just try and appreciate something of the depth and intensity of this man's love for his servant.

In verse 2, we're told that this servant was one whom his master valued highly. He valued him highly. Now, in fairness, the language in Luke's gospel doesn't do justice.

It's accurate, but it doesn't do justice to the nature of his love. And to have a better understanding of the nature of his love, we need to see how this same account is presented for us in Matthew's gospel.

And there, we are also told of the love of this man in Matthew chapter 8 for his servant. And notice how it is described in verse 6 of Matthew chapter 8, the message that he relays.

[23 : 37] Lord, he said, my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering. He lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering.

What was the condition of his servant? Well, this servant, looking at it coldly, had become a burden. He could do nothing. He was useless as a servant.

He had no capacity to serve. He was a waste of space. The centurion would have been best to have been shot of him. But what do we find? We find that this man, in the face of the plight and the suffering of his servant, is in deep pain himself.

His heart is torn apart by witnessing his servant's painful condition. He is filled with a sense of frustration and a sense of impotence.

And he can bade it no longer. This servant, it seems, was loved like a son. And he had to do something. And no price was too high to pay.

[24 : 38] His love was directed to the most unlikely. And it was deep and compassionate. And of course, this is Christian love.

This is what Christian love ought to look like. Love for the unlikely. Love for the unexpected. Love for the unlovely. Love for those deemed to be, by many and by others, as worthless.

And so the question that comes to us, as we would humbly learn at the feet of this centurion, what about us? As a congregation, how do we demonstrate love for the most unlikely?

Do we demonstrate love for the most unlikely? How might we demonstrate such love? But there is a fourth aspect to the love of this man that I want us to consider in conclusion.

And that is this, that this love, this love of the centurion, this love for the nation, was married to faith in Jesus.

[25 : 40] If we read verses 6 and 8 of our passage in Luke chapter 7, So Jesus went with them. He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him, Lord, don't trouble yourself.

For I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me.

I tell this one, go, and he goes. And that one, come, and he comes. I say to my servant, do this, and he does it. Love is good.

But love alone would not bring healing to the broken young man who is presented to us in this account. Love alone would not reverse his accelerating slide to death.

We are told in Matthew's gospel that he was sick and about to die. He was at death's door. And love, even the deep and compassionate love of the centurion, could not close death's door.

[26 : 52] Love is good. But love alone was not enough. But love married to faith in Jesus, now that is another matter altogether.

And that is what we find here. We find the love of the centurion is married to this faith, this amazing, remarkable faith in the person of Jesus Christ.

What can we say of this man's faith? There is so much that should be said, but we will limit ourselves to noting one or two characteristics of this man's faith.

It is certainly a very humble faith. It is a humble faith. There is an interesting contrast between the elders of the Jews who approach Jesus and say, this man is worthy.

He deserves you to help him. He deserves to receive his request. And then you have the man himself. And what does the man say? He says, I'm not worthy. Others say I'm worthy, but I know I'm not worthy.

[27 : 52] I'm not worthy even for you to come into my home. Never mind, expect that you would grant my request. There is great humility in this man. The faith of this man, it is a deep faith.

It is a powerful faith, but it is a humble faith. It is also what we might call a reasonable faith. It's very interesting the manner in which he argues his case, if you wish, in terms of his confidence that Jesus is able to do this.

Not his right for Jesus to do it for him, but that Jesus is capable of doing it. And what basis does he come to that conclusion? Well, it's on the basis of a reasoned argument.

He says, well, I'm a man under authority. I'm a man who also exercises authority. And when I, who have authority, tell a soldier to go, he goes. When I tell a servant to do this, he does it.

Why? Because I have the authority to make those commands. And so he concludes. He concludes that Jesus also, as one enjoying authority, can also do this remarkable thing of healing his servant by simply pronouncing the word.

[29 : 03] It is a reasonable faith that drives him and that characterizes him. Humble, reasonable, but also to quote Jesus himself, it was amazing faith.

There in verse 7, But say the word, and my servant will be healed. Just say the word. You don't need to come. You don't need to see him. You don't need to touch him.

Just say the word. And my servant will be healed. Love combined with this kind of faith is powerful. Love combined with this kind of faith secures the kind of results that we have presented to us in this passage.

And what is the result? Well, the result is described for us in what we've read. And if we can just see how it is summarized in Matthew's account. In Matthew chapter 8 and in verse 13 we read as follows.

Then Jesus said to the centurion, Go, it will be done just as you believed it would. And his servant was healed at that very hour.

[30 : 14] There is a delicious twist in the story if we can describe it in that way. See, this man is rightly commended by Jesus for his faith.

And particularly his faith-driven conviction that by just saying the word, Jesus could heal his servant. That is what the man said.

Just say the word and it will be done. And yet, it would seem from all the evidence we have before us that the healing of this young man did not even require the pronouncing of a single word.

Isn't that a remarkable thing? It was remarkable faith on the part of the centurion to believe that Jesus only needed to say the word. But in effect, Jesus didn't even need to say the word. He says to the man, Go home, your servant is healed.

I don't even need to pronounce the word. My power is such that I don't even need to do that. But what about ourselves?

[31 : 22] We are surrounded by so many in terrible suffering. The servant of the centurion was in terrible suffering. And terrible suffering is as contemporary as it ever was and ever will be.

If we think of our society, we think of our nation. It's not, I don't think, unreasonable to describe it in some ways as in a terminal condition.

About to die. As was the case of this servant. And in those circumstances, the question that is addressed to us is, do we love like this man loved?

And if we do, that is good. But as we've also discovered, love alone is not enough. We must marry our love to faith in Jesus.

In the Gospels, Jesus is described as amazed on only two occasions. He is described in this chapter as being amazed at the centurion.

[32 : 29] We read that in verse 9. When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him. Now as I say, there is only one other occasion in the Gospels where Jesus is described in this exact same way as being amazed.

Let's just notice where it is and what amazed Jesus on that one other occasion. In Mark chapter 6 and verse 6, we read, And he was amazed.

Jesus was amazed at their lack of faith. In Mark chapter 6, we are being presented with the good citizens of Nazareth.

And we are told that Jesus is also amazed. But on this occasion, he was amazed by their lack of faith. And so as we return to where we began, And the words of our good friend John Ross on his Facebook entry, Now let's see that behind us and press on to win Scotland and the world for Jesus. Will we actually do that? Can we do that? Do we love enough to even begin doing that? Do we believe enough to engage in this stirring commission?

[33 : 53] Will we amaze Jesus? By our faith? Or will we amaze Jesus by our lack of faith? Let us pray. Thank you.

Heavenly Father.