

Jesus Was Impressed **Luke 7:1-10**

Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV 2d Sunday after Pentecost (May 29) 2016

1 After Jesus finished presenting all his words among the people, he entered Capernaum. 2 A centurion had a servant who was very important to him, but the servant was ill and about to die. 3 When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to Jesus to ask him to come and heal his servant. 4 When they came to Jesus, they earnestly pleaded with Jesus. "He deserves to have you do this for him," they said. 5 "He loves our people and he built our synagogue for us."

6 Jesus went with them. He had almost reached the house when the centurion sent friends to say to Jesus, "Lord, don't be bothered. I don't deserve to have you come under my roof. 7 In fact, I didn't even consider myself worthy to come to you. Just say the word and my servant will be healed. 8 I'm also a man appointed under authority, with soldiers under me. I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and the servant does it."

9 When Jesus heard these words, he was impressed with the centurion. He turned to the crowd following him and said, "I tell you, even in Israel I haven't found faith like this." 10 When the centurion's friends returned to his house, they found the servant restored to health. (CEB)

This is the only place in all the Gospels (except for Matthew's parallel account of the same incident) where we are told that ANYthing or ANYone *impressed Jesus*. So what does it take to impress Jesus? Back then? Today? What would impress Jesus today? Or, in the midst of the tension in which we are living today, it should more accurately be said: "What would *favorably impress* Jesus today?"

The thing that impresses Jesus, this scripture tells us, is this centurion's faith. Sermons, I suppose, are voluminous that talk about Christian faith.

But there is little, if anything, in the response of the centurion that matches the Apostles' Creed that we read earlier, nor the Nicene Creed that is printed in your bulletin. Of all the creeds printed in your hymnal between pages 880 and 886, #883 might be the only one that would come close to the Centurion's faith – that of the United Church of Canada. That creed contains the least amount of theological doctrine . It is primarily a statement of **orthopraxy** (right PRACTICE) instead of **orthodoxy** (right belief.)

I have heard it said that

- the original, closest to the source, of the Incarnation of the Word of God is the Jesus event.
- Second came the Jesus stories.
- Thirdly, came scriptures.
- And then, finally, came the calcified doctrines and creeds, which focus on the theological statements, almost devoid of personality and power.

This fourth level is what we use to separate the “IN” crowd from the outsiders ... what we use to decide who is worthy and who is not.

It is this petrified fourth level that is so often referred to as being what is necessary for the sinner's lip to

mutter in order to “be saved.” Just say those words; recite that creed and believe it in your heart, and *voila!* you are saved.

Perhaps you remember the tale told by Emo Phillips about OrthODOXY the likes of which is too often practiced:

I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. So I ran over and said **"Stop! don't do it!"**

"Why shouldn't I?" he said.

I said, **"Well, there's so much to live for!"**

He said, **"Like what?"**

I said, **"Well...are you religious or atheist?"**

He said, **"Religious."**

I said, **"Me too! Are you Christian or Buddhist?"**

He said, **"Christian."**

I said, **"Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?"**

He said, **"Protestant."**

I said, **"Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?"**

He said, **"Baptist!"**

I said, **"Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?"**

He said, **"Baptist Church of God!"**

I said, "**Me too! Are you original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?**"

He said, "**Reformed Baptist Church of God!**"

I said, "**Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915?**"

He said, "**Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915!**"

I said, "**Die, heretic scum,**" and pushed him off the bridge.

One of the problems with orthoDOXY is that our reasoning powers are not very good at leading us to the truth. Is anyone else amazed at how divergent reasonable people are in their thinking and in their language about other people and issues in this year's election?

Part of our problem is that most of us have a flawed thinking process. **Let me illustrate, from a study I recently read.**

The study works like this: the researcher gives the subject three numbers, and asks for THE RULE behind these numbers. In order to figure out the Rule, the

subject is allowed to lay out any other three numbers and ask if they follow the Rule. When the subject thinks she or he has the Rule, s/he states it.

The researcher says: “Two, Four, Six.”

The subject says: “Eight, Ten, Twelve.”

The researcher says: Correct.

The subject says: “One hundred twenty, One hundred twenty-two, One hundred twenty-four.”

The researcher says: Correct.

The subject says: The Rule is any three consecutive even numbers.

The researcher says: This is incorrect. Here let me start you again: These three numbers: Five, Seven, Nine.

The subject says: “Eleven, Thirteen, Fifteen

The researcher says: Correct.

The subject says: “One hundred twenty-one, One hundred twenty-three, One hundred twenty-five.”

The researcher says: Correct.

The subject says: The Rule is any three consecutive numbers, separated by two.

The researcher says: This is incorrect. The **RULE** is any three ascending numbers.

If the subject had asked something to **TEST** her/his hypothesis, e.g. **four, five three**, and was told **Incorrect**, then they would not have continued to pile up the evidence in support of a wrong conclusion.

But this IS the human tendency. It's called a **BIAS FOR CONFIRMATION**, which we mostly tend to use instead of TESTING TO DETERMINE THE TRUTH.

Most all of us have an urge to confirm what we believe, and will look for all kinds of information to confirm that belief, rather than to (a) search for the truth, or (b) search for why other people believe differently from us.

That's why people tend to believe what they believe and call it **ORTHODOXY** and tend to look at what others believe and call it **HERESY**.

In my weekly Bible study, among seminary trained and ordained elders of the Church, there was a very lively discussion about the meaning of today's scripture. Some took the position that what impressed Jesus so much gave evidence of the fact that this non-Jew, non-Christian was on the right track that Christianity cannot

claim exclusivity for salvation. Others used the very same scripture as proof of the exclusivity of Christianity for salvation. None were able to persuade the others to see it correctly. i.e. the way that they did.

However, at the end of the meeting time, all of these folks gathered around the table and received Holy Communion together, and expressed their love for one another.

OrthoPRAXy, you see, focuses much on the mission, on the personality of Jesus, and relies heavily on the power that is available in the Kingdom of Heaven at hand. Even if the expression of CREED is different. Even if there is disagreement over THEOLOGICAL TRUTH.

What really impresses Jesus today, I suspect, is the same as what impressed Him in the first century: people who understand the power that is available, who rely upon that power, and who use that power for healing. As Jesus told His disciples: **If they're not against us, they are for us.**

Let me tell you a story about Freddy. Like all good stories must, it begins with: "Once upon a time, ...

... there was a man named Freddy. Freddy was a good man and had grown up in a good, Christian home. He had - as some would describe it, a “drug problem” in his early years. Whenever his mother or father went to worship, they “drug Freddy” along. He was with his parents in church whenever the church door was open - worship, Sunday School, revivals, special worship, youth meetings - Freddy always managed to be “drug there.”

But he didn't resent it. It was a way of life with which he not only considered “normal,” but also was something in which he found both enjoyment and great meaning.

Freddy met a girl (whose name doesn't really have to be mentioned) in the Church. They dated all through high school and college, and were married shortly afterwards. But - as these things sometimes turn out - even though Freddy thought he knew her very well, a short while into the marriage, Freddy discovered that his wife wasn't just who he thought she was. She had a serious drinking problem, which only grew worse, not better - regardless of how much Freddy tried to

help her out, tried to get her help, and prayed about it. After a few years of marriage, Freddy's wife left him for another man, and also left him with a mountain of debt.

I didn't know Freddy then - actually, it was before my time. I only heard about this part of Freddy's life from other folks. They said that Freddy was devastated by all that happened in his failed marriage. But they also said that Freddy would often be heard to say: "I am in the Potter's Hands; what God has in store for me is better than I can ask or imagine."

Freddy never remarried, and he never had children. He seemed to be content to invest, what he would have given to his children, into the children of the Church. He worked hard with the youth group, and became a real role model for them. He gave his time tirelessly - even after the age when many adults seem to get the notion that it's time for someone else to get involved, and they quit working with the children and the youth.

Then one time - and this was after I got to know Freddy, when he worked with my youth

group - one of the teenagers told a story about Freddy - said that he had done something they called "inappropriate" with her. (Her name isn't really important.) Word moved like wildfire around the church - as rumors of something bad seems to always move faster in the church than stories about anything good. I couldn't believe it. Not Freddy!

He never said anything in his own defense. I went and talked to him about it. All he would tell me was: "Things aren't always what they seem. We'll leave it in the Potter's hands. What God has in store is better than we can ever ask or imagine."

I was furious, when I finally talked to the girl and found out that she had made the whole story up. I'm not psychologist, but I think she just wanted some attention. By the time the whole thing got worked out, her parents (not her, although I thought it should have been!) made a public apology in the Church, and Freddy was cleared - although I know that there are some people who, once they get a bad idea about

someone in their heads, they have a hard time letting go of it.

But – for the most part – Freddy’s honor and reputation were restored. And the Church learned some very important lessons, in the process.

And Freddy – well, he just kept on doing what he had always done. He just loved to do things for other people.

Freddy got cancer a few years after that. Actually, the diagnosis was made during a routine exam, but the doctor recommended that they not do anything about it – just watch it, for six months, and see what happened. It’s hard for me to believe it – even today – with all that we hear about the importance of early detection. But six months later, Freddy’s cancer had spread so much that what could have been treated, with a fairly good prognosis, was now in a very advanced stage. I know that there were lawyers in the Church who recommended that Freddy file a malpractice action.

But Freddy wouldn’t hear of it. He just said, “What’s done is done. What I’ve got to do – all any

of us can do - is just deal with the present moment. No sense re-hashing old history. **And, besides -- things aren't always what they seem. We'll leave it in the Potter's hands. What God has in store is better than we can ever ask or imagine."**

I was well beyond being a youth at this point, but I think I was closer to Freddy then than before. It just amazed me to see his faith in action. As his body was wasting away, he still kept on coming to Church. It got to the point where that was all that he was able to do - just come to worship. He was no longer able to do any other work in the Church. But his faithfulness was such a powerful testimony to his faith. He had no idea of how much his life had meant to so many people. And he really had no idea of what an impact it had on people that he just showed up.

It got to the point, however, when Freddy was no longer able to even come to worship. I visited with him regularly. I'll never forget our conversation that one day:

"You know, I'm having a hard time dealing with this now. I've spent my whole life loving Jesus,

and I've always enjoyed being able to help others. But, now, I'm not able to help anyone. Now, I have to rely upon people coming in to help me. At first I had a hard time accepting that help. I really did! **And then I remembered: things aren't always what they seem. We'll leave it in the Potter's hands. What God has in store is better than we can ever ask or imagine. And I finally realized that this, too, is an important lesson for me to learn. If I don't know how to receive, even when I can't give, then I'm not ready to receive my very own salvation - because that's totally a gift. And so - even though my pride didn't like the idea to begin with, now I know. This, too, is a precious gift from God.**

Freddy died not long after we had that conversation. I guess he had passed the final exam, in that lifetime academy of preparing a soul for eternity.

Not all of the lessons that came through his school of hard knocks were just for his own personal growth. Some of them were for the people around him.

Freddy, like the centurion, understood the source of power.

Freddy, like the centurion, allowed his life to be dependent upon that source of power.

Freddy, like the centurion, maybe did not have all the theology correct. But he had the important stuff right. And he shaped his life around that.

And that still impresses Jesus.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.