



## TRUST

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I want to start off this morning by showing you the world's most unusual belly button. It's not an innie or an outie, and it's totally lint-free. And no, it's not mine. Before I make you too squeamish, I will tell you it's not a person's belly button – it's a city's. This is the Golden Milestone, an ancient monument you can still see to this day if you ever visit Italy. Have you heard the old saying, "All roads lead to Rome?" This is why. Located near the Temple of Saturn, it was the hub for the highways of the Roman Empire. All the roads literally converged at that one spot. Emperor Constantine was the man who first dubbed it, "the belly button of Rome."

The Romans were famous for their amazing road system. Each one was called a "via" or a "way," and some are still in use to this day. But the beauty of them was that whether you were a peasant out in the remote countryside or a fisherman down by the sea, or an army captain off at battle, if you started walking down one of those roads, it would eventually take you to the Golden Milestone at the center of the city. It didn't matter who you were or where you started from – there was a way for you to reach Rome.

As we go through this study in Matthew, we're going to meet people who start out in completely opposite corners of society. We find them in situations that are totally diverse and unrelated. And yet there is always a way for them to get to Christ. He's at the very center of the story. It's fantastic that Matthew gives us such a broad range of personalities, because they help us know for ourselves that no matter who we are or where we start from, we, too, can encounter Jesus.

Last week we talked about a leper – somebody who was an outcast and with no status at all. Today I want to spend some time talking about the next person Matthew introduces, who comes from a much different context, someone with power and influence, but who is also longing for that touch of Christ in his life.

### **Matthew 8:5-13**

*When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering."*

*Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him."*

*The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just 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."*

*When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

*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.*

I saw a commercial that caught my eye this week. It's for a new TV show called The Mentalist. Take a look. (Show clip)

The point is very simple: It's easy to focus in on one thing and completely miss something else. It would be very easy to do that with our story this morning. Given the fact that we just saw Jesus heal a leper last week, that's what our eyes are looking for. We're prepared to see him do something similar again. And we quickly zero in on the miracle. Not only does Jesus heal, but he heals long distance – without even seeing or touching the person. A paralyzed man is cured instantly. It's a spectacular miracle.

But as our attention is drawn to the phenomenal nature of what Christ did, we may end up missing what the story is really about, which is the centurion's faith. This is the only time Matthew ever describes Jesus as being astonished. This man's faith was so remarkable that it amazed even Christ. What was so unique about it? And maybe more importantly, what enabled him to have it? How could somebody who had never met Jesus have more faith in him than his inner circle of friends? We may assume strong faith is easiest for people who grew up with it, but the centurion kind of blows that theory out of the water.

The Bible gives us a relatively simple definition of faith in Hebrews:

**Hebrews 11:1**

*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*

Faith is that strong confidence in someone or something that enables us to trust them. Trust is a good synonym for faith. And I think most of us could agree on that basic definition. The real question we want to know is how do you get it? What gives somebody that kind of confidence?

In a way, it's comforting to know how rare the centurion's faith seemed to be, and that it didn't come naturally to Jesus' first disciples. Because it sure doesn't come naturally for most of us. Belief can be challenged by nagging doubts that God isn't real. Trust can be

difficult when circumstances would indicate God either isn't all powerful or he isn't all that good. And confidence can be shaken when we see that some of the smart people around us don't believe the same things we do.

But as rare and challenging as true faith may be, Jesus reacted to the centurion in a way that would suggest it's incredibly important. Jesus praises it in the man, but he also delivers a blistering criticism of the lack of belief he sees around him. In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that some people who think they have an in with God won't even make it to heaven because of their unbelief. It's a pretty dire picture, with all the crying and anguish he talks about.

The only reason Jesus would say something like that was if he held out hope that his listeners could change. His goal isn't to depress them with the sorry state of their eternal future. He doesn't want to leave them faithless. His message is one of redemption -- that it is possible to move from no faith to faith. The centurion is more than just a curious freak of nature to admire -- his story is shared to give us clues that can help our own faith.

Let's walk through this passage a little more slowly and see what we find.

*When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering."*

Archaeologists have done a lot of excavating in and around Capernaum. It's been a site that has confirmed a great deal of what Matthew and the other writers have described. They've actually discovered the remains of Peter's house, where Jesus spent much of his time. They can tell from all the inscriptions. They've found the ruins of the synagogue where he would have taught. And they've discovered a Roman-style settlement right next to the main village, where people like the centurion would have lived, somewhat separately from the Jews.

In Jesus' day, Capernaum was a medium sized village of about 1,500 people, and most of them had probably turned out that day to see what Jesus would do.

Now we don't know anything about what interactions were like between the soldiers and the townspeople. But I think some experiences are universal. If you're living anywhere with a foreign military presence, there's bound to be some tension. The centurion no doubt commanded respect and a little fear among the locals. He would project strength and toughness. So imagine the crowd's surprise when he shows up asking Jesus for something.

He has a servant who has become paralyzed and is in a lot of pain. When Luke tells the story he gives us some additional details about the servant's condition.

### **Luke 7:2-3**

*There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die.*

Just a side note here – I hope you don't mind when I jump occasionally to the versions of these stories that are found in the other gospels. Some people may wonder if the differences between them mean one is right and one is wrong, but that's not really what's going on.

Did you ever see the movie *Vantage Point*? An explosion happens, and the first 20 minutes of the film, you're viewing it through the eyes of a secret service agent. Then it goes back over the same time period, but this time you're watching events from someone else who was there. Then it does it again and again, until you begin to see details you were unable to get from a single perspective.

That's what we get when we find the same story told differently in the different gospels. Each writer sees the facts from their own unique vantage point, and quite often they see different things.

Luke draws attention to just how dire this servant's situation was. He is on death's door. The paralysis was from disease rather than a fall or accident, probably something like polio that had no known cure at the time. And Luke tells us how important this servant was to the centurion.

For all the centurion's status and strength, he was in a helpless spot of desperation, looking on and not being able to do a thing about it. But as Ole Hallesby once said, "Your helplessness is your best friend in prayer."

This is what I would call **the when of faith**. Faith grows best in the shade, the times of shadow and darkness when we can't see clearly. It's the opposite of what we would expect. When we say we want more faith, we typically mean we want more clarity. We want to know for certain what's coming. But growing our faith involves situations where we will have the most opportunity to exercise it. And usually that's the times when we have to lean on it because we have nowhere else to go.

Dr. E. Stanley Jones was a missionary to India for most of his life. He was good friends with Gandhi and had a remarkable impact on the country. After he had retired, he had a terrible stroke that left him unable to move or even talk well. You would think a man who had spent a lifetime devoted to serving God and making all these sacrifices for his faith might question how God could leave him in that condition, and that his physical disabilities might make him doubt. But instead, he wrote these words: "I need no outer props to hold up my faith, for my faith holds me."

I remember being at one point in my life where everything I thought would carry me was called into question. The things I thought I was good at, the things I thought I wanted, the things I took pride in – one by one they began to crumble away. I could see this image in my mind of me sitting on top of all these supports, and God was taking his finger and flicking each one out from under me as if they were toothpicks. But what I found was that his other hand had been under those supports all along, so when I fell, I

fell right in his palm. And in the process I learned to put more faith in God and less in myself. And I think that's what Dr. Jones was talking about. You can have other things stripped away without your faith shredding, because you have less artificial supports to lean on. Faith can offer a safe, strong place in the times when we are at our weakest. As we turn to God when we have nowhere else to go, we discover that he is there and that he is the only one who can get us through the storm.

**Isaiah 50:10**

*Let him who walks in the dark,  
who has no light,  
trust in the name of the LORD  
and rely on his God.*

Too often we want finality more than faith. We want the resolution, the answered prayer, the clear path. But the irony of faith is that it does its maturing in the questions and waiting and the crises that seem like they would destroy it.

In his desperation, the centurion reaches out to Jesus, not caring how it looks or what anybody would think of a Roman soldier humbling himself that way. And Jesus is right there with an answer. He tells him, "I will go and heal him." That could have been the end of the story. But strangely enough, the centurion actually pushed back a bit.

*The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just 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."*

Does it take more faith to ask more of God, or less? Because if we really stop to analyze this, the centurion is asking Jesus to do less than what he offered. Jesus was ready to go and heal the man in person. The centurion says, "That won't be necessary, thank you. Just a word will do."

I find that fascinating. Jesus doesn't draw attention to this man's great faith until the centurion asked him to NOT do something! Somewhere in this man's words right here is the key to staggering faith that floored Jesus. This is **the WHAT of faith**.

When we think of bigger faith, we think of people who are able to make the big requests. Ask God for a huge miracle. Ask him to cure cancer and fix the economy and end hunger. But I think if we translate the centurion's experience into our own, we could also say **true faith is big on small things**. The daily problems are some of the hardest to go to God with, because we don't think of doing it.

It makes me think of another time Jesus healed a paralytic. Before he healed the man, he told him his sins were forgiven. The religious leaders rolled their eyes at that one. Then Jesus said, "Which is easier – to say, "Your sins are forgiven" or "Get up and walk?" We gravitate toward the super miraculous when the acts of God to clean up our soul are just

as momentous. True faith knows that hearing what Christ has to say is equally as powerful as a miraculous touch. Are we asking Jesus for less as well as more – help forgiving, help handling stress at work, help being kind to our children, help making it through an ordinary day? He’s willing to do the big things and equally concerned about what seems small.

According to Luke, the centurion had some Jewish friends were doing their part to plead his case to Jesus.

**Luke 7:4-5**

*When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue."*

They are hoping that he has earned a miracle, so they press home his good qualities with Jesus. But the centurion himself isn’t counting on that. As we read earlier, he tells Jesus, “I don’t even deserve to have you come into my house.” That’s a big contrast in approaches, and it’s part of why this man’s faith is so unique. ***True faith depends on God’s grace, not his gratitude.***

If we’re counting on God’s help because of something we’ve done, that’s not faith: that’s entitlement. That’s feeling like God owes us something.

The centurion draws us back to the basic fact of faith that we are bringing nothing to the table. And that’s one we always fight against. We want God to save us because we’re special. We want him to do favors for us because we’ve been pretty good lately. But that’s trying to turn God into some kind of karma. Grace is what he’s about – loving on us when nothing about us says we’re worth his time.

The centurion also shows us that ***true faith connects God and life.*** I love the way he relates how Jesus works to how he himself works. “I’ve got a chain of command, just like you. I give orders the same way you do.” He found a way to see God in terms he dealt with on a daily basis, and that made God more understandable to him.

Faith is not a generic subject, and as we seek to develop it more fully in our hearts, it will be in part due to finding links between our specific context and God. The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, “Christ plays in ten thousand places, lovely in eyes and lovely in limbs, not his.”

Christ can be found in each of our settings. What is unique about your life station that connects with the character of God? Can you see ways that your job in construction or the medical field or as a parent or a lawyer or engineer reflects who Jesus is and what he does? He plays in ten thousand places.

The centurion identified something crucial in his particular job that helped him trust in Christ, and that was the concept of authority. Anybody who has served in the armed

forces understands what the centurion is getting at here. If you enlist in the U.S. military, you take the following oath:

*I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice.*

Obeying orders is part of the culture. The higher ranking person who gives the order is be trusted and followed because of their position. Only when that person has broken the trust and ordered something that is criminal can the order be disobeyed. Otherwise, there's no second-guessing or questioning their judgment.

What the centurion is saying is that *true faith recognizes it's a control issue*. How much do we trust God with whatever situation we're facing? Because our difficulties with faith often reflect our personal desire for control. It's not so much that we don't believe in God – it's that we want to be the ones to determine the outcome to our prayers. And we have trouble leaving the solutions up to him.

I was talking with somebody this week. I called him up and asked how he was doing. It turned out he had just been laid off a few days earlier. I immediately felt bad and said, "Oh no! I'm so sorry."

But he said, "Oh I'm happy. It was an answer to prayer. I was dying in that job and didn't know what to do, so I started praying about it. Two days later, they called three of us in and laid us off. I felt so good and relieved. And because they laid us off, I'll be able to collect unemployment. I've just enjoyed this week with my family."

That's what faith looks like. Rather than being filled up with worry and anxiety when the world is out of your control, it's a peace that comes from trusting that God is still in control, that he sees you and that he has a good plan.

I'm not so great at relaxing in God. I tie my own knots in my stomach by trying too hard to be the one in charge. True faith sees the control issues at work and is willing to let God call the shots.

The centurion trusted Christ with the need. But he didn't see it as necessary to have Christ physically present to do his work. He believed Jesus could just speak into the situation and have it be just as effective. In other words, if you were defining what the centurion's faith looked like, you would have to say that he took Christ's word very seriously.

I think of this as **the HOW of faith**, because if we're looking for the way God works in our lives, most of the time the answers are going to come from his Word. Just like Christ

wasn't physically present for healing the servant, he's not physically present for our needs either. But his word is still just as powerful.

Any time a discussion about faith comes up, I always think of the name George Mueller. Mueller lived back in the 1800s and ran an orphanage. He vowed to never ask people for money – only God. And time after time, God provided in amazing ways. He actually influenced how we do things here at New Day. At one point in his life, he also pastored a church in England. This was back in the day when people paid pew rents to get a certain seat in the church. He thought that was terrible, so he did away with it and just put a box in the back to collect offerings and just let members give as they felt led. People told him he'd never get enough support that way, but he did.

Praise God we've had the same experience. We don't want anyone to ever feel like New Day wants them here for their money, which is why we don't pass an offering plate and just set out the box on the side table. And God has faithfully prompted people to give all that we have needed.

But back to George. He had this strong faith all through his life. When he travelled to Africa, they called him “the man who got things from God.” I'll just give you one small example. Once he came to the United States for a visit to the White House. On the way here, the ship got completely socked in by fog off the coast of Newfoundland. Mueller told the captain, “I have to be in Quebec by Saturday.” The captain said, “That's impossible.” The fog was simply too thick.

Mueller responded by saying, “I've never broken an engagement in 52 years. Let's go down to the chart-room to pray.”

The captain thought he was crazy, but went with him. Mueller prayed a simple prayer. Then the captain started to pray. But Mueller cut him off and said, “Don't bother. First of all, you don't believe God is going to answer, and second of all, I believe he already has.”

They went back up on deck, and guess what? The fog was completely gone. And they made their destination on time. That was just the kind of confidence Mueller lived with, the same remarkable kind of trust as the centurion.

But when people would ask him how to increase their own faith, he would always point them to Scripture. Because that, he said, is where we find the character and nature of God. We see that he is described as holy and good and loving and kind and just and compassionate and a protector and deliverer and shepherd and life and light.

And there aren't just descriptions: We see him in action. God parts the sea and heals the lame and calms the storm and gives food in the wilderness and supplies oil in the jars and wins the battles and gives strength to the weary and raises the dead and sends his Spirit. That's why God's word is vital to our faith – it tells us what kind of God we are talking about and shows us what he has already done in the past and WHY he deserves our complete trust in the present.

I saw an article by Betsy Childs this week that pointed out how we normally think about faith in terms of the future. What do we believe God can or will do for us? But she said that's really the opposite of what's true. *Faith is ultimately about the past*, because it is having that rock-solid trust in who God is and what he has already done, knowing that he never changes.

One character who is central to our story this morning has been completely silent, and that's the servant. The person benefitting from the miracle and from the faith of the centurion is this other figure we know little about.

What we do know is that he was paralyzed. He was incapable of moving toward Jesus himself. And this got me reflecting on **the WHO of faith**. We have this beautiful example of someone going to Christ on behalf of somebody else who was incapable of going on their own.

We need each other as we take this journey of faith. There are times when each of us will need the body of Christ to plead with him for us because we just can't do it ourselves. It wasn't hard for the centurion to figure out who needed his help. He just looked at who was important to him and in pain.

In your own life, who is important to you and in pain? Take them to Christ. Who is stuck and unable to ask God for help? Take them to Christ. Who doesn't have the faith on their own to believe God cares? Take them to Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "Our brother (or sister) has been given to me that even here and now, I may be made certain through him of the reality of God..."

We are here for each other. Faith is a community project – not a solo one. We are strengthened by what we see God doing in and through one another. And we bear the responsibility of holding each other up in prayer as a constant reminder to God of the needs of his children.

I'd like to have centurion type faith. Wouldn't it be great to be full of trust, letting go of control, seeing how God relates to my own life.

Some of you can't identify with the centurion this morning, but you sure can relate to the servant. You're hurting. You're powerless. You're paralyzed. Maybe you've been praying and your own prayers at this point feel hollow and meaningless. Maybe you feel like your faith is puny and shriveled up. You're needing some centurion types to come around you and bring your case to God, because you just can't do it yourself right now.

Still others of you find any kind of faith difficult, and if that's where you're at, I would challenge you this morning to identify more clearly where your biggest questions are. Do they revolve around the when of faith, some crisis that derailed you? Maybe it's the whole piece of letting go of control that we talked about. Or maybe Scripture is a

sticking point for you. If you can pinpoint an area that gives you trouble, then you can ask God to reveal himself specifically in that one spot and begin to watch for his response.

Wherever you are, I want to take us back to that opening picture for this morning. I love the smile on the little girl's face as her dad is tossing her in the air. She's not nervous about him catching her. She's relaxed and letting him do the work. She's worry free and full of joy. She's the very picture of trust.

That's faith at its best – being released from worry. I hope that what we've said today doesn't make it feel like faith is this enormous burden to work at, one more thing we're not quite good enough at. One more thing to worry about. That's not it at all. Like the girl in the picture, I hope what we take away is that **faith is freedom** – freedom from anxiety, freedom from trying to control things, freedom from fear of failure. Faith isn't supposed to be a chore – it is intended to let us relax in the knowledge that God is here for us and we are safe. Like the Chris Rice song says, that we can just fall on Jesus and live.

### **Ephesians 2:8**

*Because of his kindness, you have been saved through trusting Christ. And even trusting is not of yourselves; it too is a gift from God.*

It's all from him. And when those first disciples realized how small their own faith was, their response wasn't too despair or strain harder to be better believers. They just turned to Christ and said, "Lord, increase our faith!"

May that be our prayer as well.