

"UNDERESTIMATING THE POWER OF GOD"

TEXT: "Go now; and your reward shall be equal to your faith!"

(Matthew 8: 13)

INTRODUCTION We're given to making estimates in life far more often than we sometimes realize. People who are contemplating a move from one place to another are usually interested in getting some idea of the approximate cost. Contractors make estimates as they prepare to bid on a job. In contemplating retirement, we estimate our anticipated needs and income. Some of us are even required to file an estimate with the Internal Revenue Service regarding next year's income and the tax on that income. Daily we make estimates of one kind...

But more critical to our happiness and well-being are the estimates that we make about ourselves. "I can do this. I can't do that". "I can be this. I can't be that". "I can change this. I can't change that".

Reason and ambition are in constant negotiation within us. The real and the ideal struggle with each other. Freedom and destiny are in tension within us.

Let me turn the card face up and declare my main assertion right here at the beginning of this sermon. I believe our estimates about ourselves are usually lower than need be because we underestimate the power of God. Or, to put it in plainer terms, we under-live our potential because our faith is weak.

DEVELOPMENT Today's scriptural text crowns one of the better known healing episodes in the life of Jesus. The story is told, with minor differences, in both Matthew and Luke. It happened in Capernaum as Jesus began His Galilean ministry. As He entered the town, He was approached by a Centurion - a Roman, no doubt - a soldier, probably an officer in the army of Herod Antipas.

The man came straight to the point, and a grim point it was: "Lord, my boy at home has been struck down by paralysis. He is in agony". Jesus responded in a way that was scarcely expected, saying, "Am I to come and heal him?" In other words, "Are you looking for someone to deliver this boy or are you merely in quest of a philosophy that will help you deal with his situation?" The man lost no time in replying, "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you under my roof; but you have only to say the word and my boy will be cured".

Jesus was amazed, indeed ecstatic, at such confidence. Turning to this troubled father, He spoke reassuringly, "Go now; and your reward shall be equal to your faith."

Now there are a number of roadside rests in this narrative, places to linger and pick out some meaning. The humility of the Centurion in making this public appeal for help. Or the delight that Jesus took in so noble a demonstration of faith. Or the irony that an outsider should possess more faith than Jesus could find in Israel. However, we must resist stopping and get to the main point.

This Centurion as he estimated his son's chances - that is, as he appraised his present situation - included God. In the mod language of the sociologist, he "factored in" the power of God. His confidence was not misplaced, for the boy - his son - was cured! "Go now; and your reward shall be equal to your faith".

This story was doubtless included in the Scriptures in order to awaken and enliven our faith in God. To help it achieve this worthy end, let us single out the two outstanding characteristics of this Centurion's faith. First: it was a faith that challenged God. Second: it was a faith that was related to a specific need. Let's consider both points here for a few moments this morning.

A FAITH THAT CHALLENGED GOD

It was a faith that challenged God. There are times, of course, when faith must acquiesce, when faith must find its own Gethsemane and in submission pray: "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt". There are those occasions in life when faith must accept what is and learn from the unchangeable. But I suspect that such times are fewer than we generally surmise.

It is easier to ponder the uses of adversity than to seek the help of God in removing that adversity. Mind you, prayers of resignation are not the only prayers that belong to our faith. I believe that there are many times in our lives when God expects of us something other than abject acquiescence.

Ministers are always interested in sermon titles. That's what many preachers live on and live for. I always check the Saturday papers to see the sermon titles of other preachers. Last Summer a Baptist preacher in Portland, Maine (not far from where we were summering) listed this title for his sermon, "When Life Gives You Lemons, Make Lemonade". This is the tactic of acquiescence. This is to emphasize destiny at the expense of freedom. Somehow I can't help but feel that God might say, "When life gives you lemons, fling them back and ask for a better shake".

The Centurion didn't come to Jesus looking for some philosophy of suffering, or explanation of it all. He came to storm the power that he sensed was resident in the person of Jesus. Very simply, he wanted his son cured.

I sometimes feel that our failure to put God to the test frequently masquerades as piety. In most cases, however, it is sheer unbelief. Walter Wagoner in a recent book of his coins two terms, at least they're two terms I had never bumped in to before - "Godism" and "Christianism". He writes,

"Godism, or Christianism is best defined as the slow, usually unwitting, substitution of ideas, things and activities about God or Christ for the real faith in and service to God and Christ".

"Godism" and "Christianism" eventually take us to the place where we end up refusing to challenge anything in God's name. Either ~~one~~ can make us perpetually compliant with what is. I believe that God's heart was warmed when Peter, shortly after the resurrection, went to the temple and found the paralytic lying there and said,

"Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I unto thee; in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise up and walk!"

Some wisdom was born in the bullpen of the Mets late last Summer as they surged their way toward the pennant. Remember it. "Ya gotta believe". Isn't it interesting that when unsophisticated types get hold of the gospel, or when the gospel gets hold of them, they come boldly to expect big things from God! The sects within Christendom are the ones that talk about transformation and healing and the large differences that God's spirit can make. Those of us in the old

established traditions are forever qualifying our confidence and our expectations in the power of God to produce change.

As you know, the Exorcist as a book and a film ~~is~~ has been making quite an impact on the consciousness of America. Perhaps what many people like about that work is the assurance it gives that all the demons that bedevil humanity need not be accomodated. The power of exorcism is given us in the very gift of prayer.

We must live around some mountains, true. But there are other mountains that we must bid begone. "Go now; and your reward shall be equal to your faith".

A FAITH RELATED TO A SPECIFIC NEED

The Centurion's faith challenged God. And secondly, his faith was related to a specific need. He didn't just believe God. He believed God for healing. And not just for healing, but for the healing of his son!

The Bible teems with illustrations of this sort of thing. It's as though God were saying, "Don't talk of faith - show me!"

Some of you who are not at home with the various terms of the Scriptures likely do not know what we mean when we speak about "putting the fleece on the rock". This is a reference that comes from the Book of Judges out of that hectic period in which a man by the name of Gideon was summoned by God to lead the Israelites in battle against their foes. Notice this. Gideon says, "If thou wilt deliver Israel by my hand as Thou hast said, 'Behold I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor'". That night Gideon placed a fleece of wool on the threshing floor and said to God, "If you really want me to do this, and if you are sure that I can do this, I want that fleece to be dry in the morning when all around it is wet". When he arose the next day the fleece was dry and the surrounding ground was wet with morning dew.

But Gideon wasn't finished. This might have been a fluke. "I'd like you to reverse it next time, God. Tomorrow morning I want to come out and find the fleece wet and all else around it dry". Next morning when he looked, the fleece was wet and everything around it dry. He believed God for the deliverance of Israel - in that time, in that place, in that crisis. It was a faith related to a specific need. Belief in general is hardly worth the stirring, is it.

So I come to this question: what is there in your life that you have believed God for lately?

SPECIFIC NEED

Some of us are handicapped by strong feelings of inadequacy. I challenge you to believe God for the furnishing of what you lack.

Some of us are suffering from a needless loss of health. I challenge you to believe God - to believe Him for healing!

Some of us are being eaten alive by an active, consuming hatred for some other person who has hurt us. I challenge you to believe God for cleansing.

Some of us are captive to base desires, unworthy affections, degrading habits. I challenge you to believe God for your transformation.

Some of us are locked in a cell of inconsolable grief. I challenge you to believe God for a calm and joyful heart.

Some of us are afraid of the world, afraid of other people, afraid of ourselves. I challenge you to believe God for courage.

CLOSING One of the newest gadgets on the market today and one of which my sixteen year old son has recently brought into our home is the pocket calculator. Tremendous little instrument. I wish I had had one when I was in high school. It would have helped. As number plays an increasingly important role in our lives such devices will grow in use and popularity. Remember the heart also makes its calculations. Remember that man is an incurable estimator.

"What are my limits?" "Where are my boundaries?" "What can I yet be?" I believe that God has more to give us than we are willing to receive, and to underestimate His power is to sell short our human potential.

As the bullpen of the Mets put it, "Ya gotta believe". What you believe is what you get! Said Jesus, "Go now; and your reward shall be equal to your faith!"

PRAYER Remind us, O God, that with thee all things are possible. We believe. Help thou our unbelief.

Conscious we are of our spiritual weakness. Help us in these quiet moments of worship to renew our hold on those energies which we need if we are to drive out the devils of our world and the devils in our lives.

Help us to take time apart from the world of busy activity and ground us in the things that we really believe so that when Jesus lifts us up, we shall be able to stand firmly on our feet.

May the bread and the wine open our eyes, dear God, to His presence and His power among us now . In His name and spirit, we pray.