

UNUSUAL SNAPSHOTS

LUKE 7:1-17

M.I. LIFE WITH JESUS IS FULL OF ALL SORTS OF SURPRISES.

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Unusual snapshots

Luke 7:1-17

Jesus seems to be a man full of surprises. Even though He is God in the flesh, He chose to be born in an obscure way. He was born to a common couple. He grew up in Nazareth, and entered the public spotlight all of a sudden. And yet, even though He was the Jewish Messiah, we still do not find Him ministering in Jerusalem yet. Jesus calls people to follow Him, and then gives them impossible rules for living. Sometimes it almost appears that He tries to anger people or make following Him so difficult, that people are repelled by His teaching.

This morning however, it will be Jesus' turn to be surprised. He is surprised by the mature faith of a Roman soldier who is not even a Jew. We will see Jesus pleasantly surprised by this guy.

And then in the second incident we will see Jesus back to His old tricks again. He kind of interrupts a funeral by raising the corpse from the dead. Not only does He raise the guy from the dead, He does it while the procession is on its way to the cemetery.

It seems to me that we have become either so cynical or so smart, that we don't leave room in our lives to be surprised. Let me give you an example.

There was a guy who used to sell hats on the roadside right outside of a certain village. One day, on waking from a nap under a tree, he found that a group of monkeys had taken all his hats to the top of the tree. In exasperation he took off his own hat and flung it to the ground. The monkeys, known for their natural urge to imitate, hurled down the hats to the ground. Immediately the hat seller promptly collected all the hats. Boy those monkeys were surprised.

About forty years later, the man's grandson inherited the business and sold hats at the same roadside stand. Like his grandfather, he also woke up from a nap one day to find that a bunch of monkeys stole his hats and took them up to the treetop. Remembering his grandfather's story, he took off his hat and threw it to the ground. But mysteriously, none of the monkeys threw any hats down. And then it happened. One monkey came down. He walked up to the bewildered guy, picked up the last hat off the ground and slapped him in face. As he walked away, the monkey put on the hat, looked back and said, "You think only you have a grandfather?" Needless to say, this time the man was surprised.

Here is the main idea of this morning's text. LIFE WITH JESUS IS FULL OF SURPRISES. I don't think we give the disciples enough credit. We always point to their mistakes and their confused faith. However, I would suggest that not many of us could have taken the emotional stress it took to live and walk with Jesus. In

fact, I think that Jesus seems mundane to us as we live our lives because we are not open to surprises. God's surprises often cause us to be anxious and stressed.

Even though God is omniscient, it seems as if that whatever this means in God's world, we have the potential to be a pleasant surprise to Him. In verses 1-10 we come across an unusual expression of faith. WE OFTEN FAIL TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF OPPORTUNITIES TO BECOME PLEASANT SURPRISES TO GOD. In other words, there are a few occasions when Jesus is pleasantly surprised by people's demonstrations of faith and love. There is another surprise that we should be aware of also. We have no idea which people could be ready to confess Jesus as Lord and Savior. Let's see how this Roman soldier catches Jesus by surprise.

AN UNUSUAL EXPRESSION OF FAITH (VS 1-10)

This incident is filled with unusual characteristics. Please try and understand how strange this whole situation is. First of all, verses 1-2 describe an unusual relationship. Jesus has just finished this incredibly demanding sermon that described loving our enemies, being generous with our money, living in faith with our eyes on eternity, and being humble. These were not things Jesus' crowd would have normally thought as desirable. Also keep in mind that Jesus is Jewish and His primary mission was to the Jews who should have been waiting for Him and His teaching.

At this point in the text, we see Jesus entering Capernaum. If you remember, Capernaum seems to be the center of Jesus' ministry. It was one of His favorite towns. That in itself is a little strange. We would expect Jerusalem, the worship center, or Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, to be the center. But Capernaum seems to be His favorite. After all, he was treated like a rock star there. Peter, Andrew, James, and John are from Capernaum as well. So it's not unusual that people are familiar with Jesus, His teachings, and His miracles. Word gets around that Jesus is back in town.

At this point, Luke introduces us to a Roman Centurion. There are several things that are unusual about this Centurion. First of all, he is extremely concerned about his servant. For the most part, servants we looked at as mere tools by the Romans. They looked down on them and when their usefulness was finished, they just kicked them to the curb. But look at the wording in verse 2. This servant was highly valued by the Centurion. The word value in Greek has two different nuances. If the slave is simply viewed as one of the Centurions assets, then the word is rightly translated value. On the other hand if the Centurion is emotionally attached, in other words if he loves the servant, the word should be esteemed. It seems as if the Centurion is emotionally attached to this servant and that's what makes him both valued and loved. The servant may have been very trustworthy, competent, and loyal. That would be unusual and yet we will see that the Centurion goes through a great deal in order for Jesus to heal this servant.

Next, in general, the Jews resented the Roman government and the Roman military. The Jews were second class citizens in their own Promised Land. And Romans tended to look down on conquered peoples. A Centurion was in charge of about 100 soldiers. The New Testament usually speaks well of Centurions. The Bible writers portray them as noble, intelligent, and brave.

But the situation gets even more unusual. In verses 3-5 we see the demonstration of some unusual faith. The Roman Centurion was probably not very religious or superstitious. And yet, when he heard that Jesus was back in town, he asked some of the Jewish elders to approach Jesus on his behalf. He believed that Jesus could heal his servant. Here is where it really gets strange. This Roman Centurion is asking some of the elders of the conquered people to approach one of their Holy Men to heal his servant. And the Jewish leaders willingly and gladly accept the mission. This cooperation and mutual respect between Romans and Jews was very unusual. Keep in mind that this Centurion is not a Jew. He is a Gentile and yet here he is, exercising faith in Jesus.

Now watch this. Not only do the Jewish leaders carry this request to Jesus, they lobby for the Centurion. Look at how classy this Centurion was. He not only ruled over the Jews, he loved them, their culture, and apparently, their religion. He built a synagogue for them to worship in. This Centurion is a man who loves like Jesus taught His disciples to love. This is the kind of love Jesus preached about on the Sermon on the Plain. This guy is an example of the wise man who built his house on the rock Jesus described at the conclusion of His sermon. This guy lived out faith. By sending a request to Jesus to heal his servant, he expressed faith in Jesus.

In verse 6 and the first half of verse 7, we see an incredibly unusual expression of humility. Remember, the Jews and Jesus are under the authority of the Roman government and this Centurion is an expression of that authority. Jesus is really interested now and so He heads for the Centurion's house. When Jesus gets close to the house, the Centurion sent some of his friends with this unbelievable message. He told Jesus not to come into his house because he was not worthy to have Jesus enter his house. Not only did the Centurion feel he was not worthy to have Jesus enter his house, he felt he was unworthy to even be in Jesus' presence. Please do not miss how incredible this is. The Centurion would have been one of the highest Roman officials in the area. It would have been an honor to be invited to his house, even though Jews may not have entered because of fear they may become religiously unclean. But no Roman official would say that to anyone, that they were not worthy to have a Jew enter their house. This Roman official says he is not even worthy to have an audience with Jesus. That is a public act of humility he may have been ridiculed for by other Roman soldiers or officials. He considered himself unworthy to be in the presence and unworthy to request anything from Jesus. I think love helps us to be humble. Love for his servant, love for the Jews, and love for God made it easy for this Roman Centurion to humble himself. Jesus must be saying, "Look at this guy. That's what I was preaching about."

But it didn't stop there. In the second half of verse 7 and verse 8, this guy now adds unusual insight to his faith and love. He lays out the case for Jesus like this. He says to Jesus that he recognizes Jesus' power and authority over the physical and spiritual world. He believes in Jesus' teachings as authoritative. He believes Jesus has power and authority over illnesses and demon possessions. Please do not miss this. The Centurion understands authority. First of all he understands that he is a man under authority. He is under the authority of Rome. But being under the authority of Rome gives him is power and authority over the soldiers under his command. He said, "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."

This Roman Centurion recognizes how great Jesus' power and authority are. The Centurion believes that Jesus doesn't even need to be in proximity to the servant. Jesus can simply will the servant to be well, and the servant will be healed. Let me add one more little detail to this scenario. Back in verse 2 Dr. Luke described this as a sickness that was to the point of death. In other words, if nature took its natural course, this servant would soon be dead.

Let's go back to the conclusion of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. Jesus obviously believed there were people in the crowd who would listen to the sermon but not obey it. He referred to them as foolish builders who build their houses on sand. But this Roman Centurion, this Gentile, is demonstrating through his love, his faith, his humility, and his insight, that he lives and obeys the concepts Jesus was teaching His followers. This guy is faithful in every way.

I'd like us to think about this for a moment. We know what Jesus expects out of us, don't we? We are to love people with love that comes from and is defined by the Heavenly Kingdom. We are not just to be kind, loving, generous, and forgiving to our family and friends, we are to be kind, loving, generous, and forgiving to even our enemies, those who hate us, and those who have hurt us deeply. And yet, we can always find reasons not to obey God, not to extend grace, forgiveness, mercy, and love to certain people. This Centurion had his reputation to worry about. What would people say when he publicly humbled himself before a Jewish itinerant preacher? He didn't care. He knew what was right and he did it! Is that really our attitudes or are we selfish, self-centered, and self-absorbed? This Centurion gave up his pride and ego in order that his servant be healed. And at personal cost, he built a synagogue for the Jesus with no ulterior motive. This Centurion lived what Jesus was preaching. He demonstrated great insight, great faith, and great love.

Verses 9-10 describe some unusual responses. Let me read all of verse 9 to you, "When Jesus heard this, He was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following Him, He said, 'I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.'" The Bible says that Jesus was amazed at this man. What a pleasant surprise for Jesus. Here is probably the least expected guy to understand the message of Jesus. Not only that, there would not be much expectation that even if he did understand, that he would be willing to act on it. But he did. The other result was that without speaking a word of healing, the servant was healed. Everyone involved in this

incident was amazed, everyone but the Centurion. Does that describe our faith? Jesus was amazed but the Centurion was expectant. I have to say that I don't think enough about doing something out of love and obedience that would pleasantly surprise Jesus. It's not that it would take that much. Since I am such a putz, it seems to me that even a little act of love and obedience on my part would be a pleasant surprise for God. It seems to me that God is pleasantly surprised when we demonstrate selfless acts of love, humility, forgiveness, and generosity. I really want to start living purposefully trying to please God and be a pleasant surprise to Him. Having said that, we know that God is omniscient; He knows everything. However it does seem as if some things really do catch Jesus' attention and bring Him amazement. WE OFTEN FAIL TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF OPPORTUNITIES TO BECOME PLEASANT SURPRISES TO GOD.

I'd have to say, traveling with Jesus is interesting. It is certainly never boring. A Roman Centurion amazed Jesus. But in verses 11-17 Jesus will be the source of an unusual surprise. Here is a great admonition to all of us. WE NEVER KNOW HOW AND WHEN WE COULD BE SURPRISED BY GOD'S BLESSINGS. We have become so cynical, materialistic, and spiritually blind, we no longer allow ourselves to be surprised by God. So far as we have read through the Gospel of Luke, I have noticed something strange and would like your thoughts on it sometime. Jesus forgave a man's sins based on the faith of his friends. Do you remember that? Here is how Luke recorded the incident:

"19... So they went up to the roof, took off some tiles, and lowered the sick man down into the crowd, still on his mat, right in front of Jesus. 20Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the man, "Son, your sins are forgiven" (Luke 5:19-20 / NLT).

And then Jesus went on to heal this paralytic just to prove a point to the Pharisees:

"24I will prove that I, the Son of Man, have the authority on earth to forgive sins." Then Jesus turned to the paralyzed man and said, "Stand up, take your mat, and go on home, because you are healed!" (Luke 5:24 / NLT).

This guy was saved because of his friends' faith and healed because Jesus wanted to prove a point. Later on, Jesus healed a man with a crushed hand just to prove a point and teach a lesson about Sabbath practices. And as we just witnessed, Jesus healed a servant based on the faith of his Centurion owner. I'm not sure what this all means but we have seen people healed and forgiven without them even asking for it. And this next case is just as strange. We would do well to be like the disciples as they wondered what in the world Jesus would do next and what kind of rabbit He would pull out of His hat this time. Keep in mind, Jesus just witnessed an extraordinary expression of faith by a Roman Centurion. Luke picks up the next incident in the city of Nain. Nain is about a one day walk from Capernaum. It is about 20 miles southwest of Capernaum. Those of you who are Old Testament fans will recognize this is close to the city of Shunem where Elisha raised a widow's son from the dead. That story is found in II Kings 4:18-37. A lot of the same emotions

are present in both incidents. This passage is full of contradictions and comparisons. I'm going to point them out as we go along.

AN UNUSUAL SURPRISE (VS 11-17)

The first happens right away as we encounter an unusual meeting in verses 11-12. We encounter two crowds. Jesus is entering the city with a crowd. This crowd is characterized by the excitement of Jesus finding faith in a Roman official and Jesus' healing the man's servant without even seeing him, speaking to him, or touching him. In a sense, Jesus healed him telepathically. Jesus was pumped and so were His followers. On the other hand, there is another crowd. This crowd is leaving the city. There is no joy in this crowd at all. They are not celebrating anything. They are mourning a death. This crowd is a funeral procession. In the Gospel of John, John says that Jesus is God's only begotten Son. This dead guy was the widow's only son. So two sons meet; One is the Lord, the giver of life, the other is dead. Do we in any way think this could be an accident? This is a God ordained meeting. Let's keep that in mind as we live our everyday lives. God brings all sorts of people into our lives. They may be physically alive, but if they are not believers in Jesus, then they are spiritually as dead as this widow's son was physically dead. They need to meet Jesus the Lord, the giver of life. If you are sitting here this morning and you are not a believer, it is no accident you are here. Jesus wants to meet you like He is about to meet this dead man.

I hear people say some of the stupidest things at funerals. I know that we really want to comfort one another but since we try to avoid all encounters with death and dying, we are extremely uncomfortable around the dead. In verse 13 Luke records an unusual statement by Jesus. In fact, it seems cruel and insensitive. He said to her, "Don't cry." What is He talking about? This is a real tragedy the woman has just suffered. She has no husband to support her. He's dead. Women needed their husbands, sons, or fathers to take care of them. They had no way of earning money. Her last source of survival was dead. Where would she go? What would she do? How would she survive? She is distraught. Her only hope to live, lie there dead. And Jesus said, "Don't cry."

But let me just go back and read the first part of the sentence, "When the Lord saw her, His heart went out to her." Jesus felt the full force of her pain, her fear, her hopelessness. Jesus felt the despair in her heart. There are so many times in our lives that we find ourselves afraid, alone, hopeless, and in despair. We face hurts that are sometimes not our fault. We face sickness, the loss of loved ones, loss of a job, or betrayal of a friend or a spouse. Some have to live with abuses suffered in the past. Whatever we need to face can be summed up in the despair and hopelessness of this widow who has lost her only son. Jesus said to her, "Don't cry." He says to each one of us, "Be hopeful." Jesus knows what we face every day. He knows we will suffer. Listen to what He says to you and me:

"33I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world" (John 16:33 / NLT).

Sometimes we don't think Jesus notices us or cares about us. We think Jesus can't help us or fix our problems. Listen to what Peter said:

"7Give all your worries and cares to God, for He cares about what happens to you" (I Peter 5:7 / NLT).

It really must be horrible for people who don't believe in God or have a relationship with Jesus. We have a God Who loves us, cares about what happens to us, and wants to send all sorts of wonderful surprises to us. So when Jesus told this woman not to cry, He said that with compassion and with full knowledge and intent to solve her problem. Everyone in both crowds are now hushed and wondering about what Jesus meant and what He was about to do.

In verses 14-15 we are invited to witness an unusual happening. Luke, the physician, has to be shaking with excitement and wonder as he pens this section. Let me set the stage. Both crowds are now only standing in confusion. The dead man is being carried out of town on a stretcher. I'm hoping the Pallbearers were caring the stretcher at their sides rather than on their shoulders. They are standing still as Jesus approaches them. Jesus reached out and touched the stretcher. And then He said it, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" Immediately, the dead man sat up and began to talk. Can you imagine if you were one of the Pallbearers? We were just carrying this dead guy out of town. All of a sudden, he sits up and starts talking to us. Perhaps he would look at us and ask us where were taking him and why we were carrying him out of town on a stretcher. What would we say to him? I don't think I could come up with a good answer. It would be more than a little awkward to tell him we were carrying him to his burial site. Wouldn't it?

After this initial time of awkwardness, Jesus walks him to his mother and gives him back to his mother. In another Old Testament incident, the prophet Elijah raised a guy from the dead. His mother was a widow also. Listen to the same phrase in this passage:

"23Then Elijah brought him down from the upper room and gave him to his mother. ..." (I Kings 17:23 / NLT).

But we need to look at the assessment of the widow:

"24Then the woman told Elijah, 'Now I know for sure that you are a man of God, and that the LORD truly speaks through you'" (I Kings 17:24 / NLT).

I pointed that out because in verses 16-17 we see an unusual response. What could we say? What could they say? The widow said to the Prophet Elijah, "I know for sure you are a man of God." What could people say to Jesus? He has forgiven

sins, He has healed the sick, cast out demons, and here He raised a dead man to life. Here is how the crowds responded. They were filled with awe. I'm thinking that there is no language that could possibly describe how they felt or how we would feel. They did whatever they could do. They started praising God. And they said this, "A great prophet has appeared among us. God has come to help his people." This is clearly Messianic language. I don't think they really understood it yet but certainly it has to start dawning on the Twelve Apostles. This was a miraculous work of God. This Jesus is certainly sent by God to help the Jewish people. What language would be adequate to express what they heard, what they saw, and what they witnessed?

And then word started to spread all over Judea and the surrounding areas. No doubt word had reached Jerusalem. The religious leaders and the political leaders must be starting to listen and observe with interest. Jesus' ministry has entered a new level. I'm hoping that as we read and study through this morning's passage, we would start to get excited about the God we worship. He loves us. He cares for us. He can do anything. We often miss the wonderful surprises God throws at us every day. Please, let's start looking for these wonderful surprises because WE NEVER KNOW HOW AND WHEN WE COULD BE SURPRISED BY GOD'S BLESSINGS. I can only tell you that God continually surprises me with wonderful things.

The truth is this. LIFE WITH JESUS IS FULL OF ALL SORTS OF SURPRISES. The reason we often miss these times that we can become a pleasant surprise to God or receive a wonderful surprise from God is that we have become too self-centered and often miss what's important because of our worldly ideas. A friend sent me this story about how we often miss wonderful surprises because we are focused on the wrong things.

"A group of alumni, highly established in the careers, were talking at a reunion and decided to go visit their old university professor, now retired. During their visit the conversation soon turned into complaints about stress in their work and lives. Offering his guests some very special tea, the professor went to the kitchen and returned with a large pot of tea and an assortment of cups: porcelain, plastic, glass, crystal, some plain looking, some expensive, some exquisite, telling them to help themselves to the tea. When all the alumni had a cup of tea in hand, the professor said:

'Notice that all the nice looking and expensive cups were taken up, leaving behind the plain and cheap ones. While it is normal for you to want only the best for yourselves, that is the source of your problems and stress. Be assured that the cup itself adds no quality to the tea. In most cases it is just more expensive and in some cases even hides what we drink. What all of you really wanted was the special tea, not the cup; but you consciously went for the best cups ... and then you began eyeing each other's cups.

Now consider this: life is the tea; your job, money and position in society are the cups. They are just tools to hold and contain life. The type of cup one has does

not define, nor change the quality of life a person lives. Sometimes, by concentrating only on the cup, we fail to enjoy the tea. The happiest people don't have the best of everything. They just make the best of everything. Live simply. Love generously. Care deeply. Speak kindly ... and enjoy your tea."

It seems to me we miss all the wonderful surprises Jesus has for us because we are focused on the containers they may come to us in.