

Matthew 8:5-13  
**“Surprised by Faith”**  
The Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift  
Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC, Roslindale, MA  
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 19, 2021

*The Reading:*

<sup>5</sup> When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him <sup>6</sup> and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.” <sup>7</sup> And he said to him, “I will come and cure him.” <sup>8</sup> The centurion answered, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. <sup>9</sup> For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it.” <sup>10</sup> When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, “Truly I tell you, in no one <sup>11</sup> in Israel have I found such faith. <sup>12</sup> I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, <sup>13</sup> while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.” And the servant was healed in that hour.

Driving in and out of Houghs Neck, my small home community in Quincy, is more difficult these days. Sea Street, the main drag, is being re-paved. Last week they tore it all up, and we’re down to gravel. They have tried to manage the heavy traffic using bright orange cones to show us new lanes. Drivers have to really pay attention to the road and the people on it, or they’ll get into trouble!

**I think that this serves as a good metaphor for life and being church. Really paying attention is important.** As we travel the road of God’s mission, for example, we must see the cones, share the lanes respectfully, and adjust in order to arrive safely at our destination.

This happens between Jesus and the Roman Centurion. Jesus is on one trajectory; his primary mission is to the House of Israel to usher them into renewed relationship with God, and this day he is in Capernaum in Galilee. The Roman military man is on a different mission, in Capernaum because he has been stationed there to keep order and make sure the Jews know who is boss. But he is *also* in desperate need. Either his son or his servant – the Greek word and the context don’t tell us which<sup>1</sup> – is unwell and in terrible distress. The Gentile’s trajectory takes him near Jesus, God’s healer.

In order to follow *God’s* way, both of them had to adjust their original trajectories. Had they not paid attention to the ‘cones’ – God’s signs – they might’ve missed each other entirely and missed out on the blessing that God had in mind.

**As you and I move forward in God’s mission, we too can get into trouble if we think that the road is just ‘One-Way.’**

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<sup>1</sup>M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. VIII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 226. The Greek word “pais” can mean either “son” or “servant.”

Had Jesus thought himself superior to the Roman, for instance, he might have ignored him and his request. He could've taken offense that the oppressor was asking for help and interrupting his progress. The military officer could've approached Jesus with an order and taken him by force to the ill person. Had this occurred, it would've have been as if each of them were going forward on his own one-way street.

Christianity has gotten into trouble when it thought that God's mission was one-way – *its* way. "We have the truth. We're bringing God to the lost. We're even okay with violence." When Christianity married Manifest Destiny, for instance, the Church perpetrated evil; it did *not* authentically share the good news of Jesus Christ!

RCC has learned from this past, and it would never force conversions or allow a false sense of superiority to usurp service, but even a progressive faith community like our own can get off kilter. We can be oblivious to the needs of others who aren't 'like us.' We can get so busy with management matters that we put off Christ's mission priorities – one of my weaknesses. Our habits can become more important to us than healing. Without listening to and loving our neighbors, the arrow on our RCC Directional Statement (*point to it in the bulletin*) would signify that we are a one-way church instead of a congregation moving forward. That's when we get into trouble.

**The bible story shows us that we navigate more faithfully, like Jesus, when we know that God's mission is 'Two-Way.'**

In his encounter with the Roman Centurion, for example, Jesus was open; he didn't fall into all the stereotypes about Gentiles or enemies. He connected to the man: to his devotion to his servant/son and his need. Jesus had compassion upon the Centurion. For *his* part, the commanding officer didn't act on any assumptions about the Jews; he acknowledged their God, respected their religion, and recognized Jesus as the Messiah, the One that commanded the power of Love. The Roman knew himself to be "under" *God's* authority and asked for a miracle with genuine humility. He felt no need for Jesus to come to his home. "Just say the word."

**By being 'two-way' in their relationship, Jesus and the Roman saw that they were actually going the *same* way: forward on *God's* mission.**

This kind of mutuality is foundational to the way that your denomination – the United Church of Christ – conducts its global mission work together. One of their named core values is Mutuality in Mission.<sup>2</sup>

When my husband and I returned from our global mission assignment in France, a few people would ask: "Why did you go to France?! It's a Christian country!" Well, yes it is, but mutuality in mission meant that we went at the invitation of our French partners, and what we learned from them became the seed of our sharing with so many congregations since! Plus, it is now the case that former mission churches in other countries are sending missionaries to the U.S. We sure *need* them!!

RCC, if you navigate your Directional Statement like Jesus did, as a mutual, two-way street, **those that you meet and minister to will minister to *you* at the same time.** After all, this story says that Jesus was surprised – utterly amazed – by the Centurion's magnificent faith! "I haven't found anyone, even among my own people, who trusts God

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<sup>2</sup>See <https://www.globalministries.org/about-2/>

the way that you do!” Jesus Christ was as blessed by their encounter as was the Roman and his son/servant.

**Surprise! God is already there, wherever you are going in mission:** in Rome or Roslindale, Capernaum or Boston, Afghanistan or Jerusalem. You are *not* bringing God to the neighbors. Following the Holy Spirit, you are going where God is *already* at work, tilling the soil, and preparing the way for mutual healing, and, guess what: they will surprise you with faith and bring God to *you!*