

“A Faith That Adds Up”

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May 29, 2016

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 96:1-6

New Testament Lesson: Luke 7:1-10

When I was in grade school, math was my least favorite subject. In college, the only math course I had to take was algebra. I got a C-, just enough for it to count – and that took two tries.

Years later when I applied to grad school, that C- didn't cut it. I had to take another college-level algebra class before they'd let me in. I worked my tail off, and at the end of the semester, finished the course with an A-. That got me into grad school – a master's program in Marketing and Communication, sort of like an MBA.

During grad school, I had to take Statistics – much harder than algebra. I got an A in that course, also, and actually graduated with a 4.0 gpa – all A's. How did a guy who hated math, got a C- in college, and had to retake it as an adult get an A in both Algebra and Statistics. Easy, I learned the formulas, and followed them, no matter what it took. Mathematical formulas are wonderful things – they always work, as long as you learn them and follow them.

I'm guessing the centurion in today's Bible story was pretty good at math, or at least at following a formula, a formula for success in life. The formula the centurion discovered and followed led him to the unimaginable – the renewal to health of someone who was facing certain death.

The Centurion achieved this incredible goal by following a formula based, not in mathematics, but in faith. Let's take a moment to look at the centurion's problem. He had a slave whom he valued highly who was ill and close to death. When the centurion “heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave.”

And of course, by the end of the story, the slave is returned to good health. I say of course the slave was in good health – brought back from the brink of death, when no one thought it possible – I say of course Jesus did this, but of course, there's always more to learn from such a story.

This story from Luke comes to us as a simplified example of how to achieve the impossible in life. Can't you imagine what the centurion went through leading up to his encounter with Jesus? Don't you suppose the centurion spent weeks if not months trying all kinds of possible treatments for his slave who had deteriorated to the point of death? Sure he did.

He probably figured that if he just got the right doctor, applied the right treatment, created the right conditions, his slave would be healed. And in the end, none of that worked. It took a different approach.

Well, the same goes for us and our families and workplaces, and even our churches. Take church, for example. Churches figure that if they just find the right pastor or other staff members, develop the right programs, restructure the committees or boards in just the right way, then people will miraculously show up and want to be a part of the family of faith.

Now, don't get me wrong. The right staff, programs and structures are important – even vital – to the success of a church. But those are only the foundation upon which we build. Once we have this foundation, the next most important thing is the way we build – the way we go about staffing our churches, developing our programs, and realigning our boards and committees.

Thankfully, we don't need to be math geniuses to figure this out. And that's a good thing by the way, because you know, there are really just two kinds of people in this world: "... Those who are good at math, those who are good at English, and those who ain't good at neither ..."

No, seriously, we don't have to be geniuses to know how best to build on the success of this church, because the story of Jesus and the Centurion gives us a formula to follow.

In any formula or equation there are **three essential components**. There are **variables**, there are **rules** to follow – such as what to do when there's a plus sign or a minus or the sign for multiplication or division – and, thirdly, there is the certainty of **a solution**, or at least the hope.

When mathematicians are breaking new ground, there is only the hope of a solution, and that's OK. Faith in yourself and this world and most of all in God can achieve miracles, even when the solution isn't apparent. Faith is what has us continue to try new things, different variables.

But either way – whether the equation is tried and true or never been done before – there is still one certainty in all of this, and that is the rules of mathematics, the rules of the society, the process established to help us reach the right conclusion or find the best solution.

The centurion knew the rules he was dealing with. He knew that Jesus was a Jewish rabbi with no obligation to help a Roman centurion. So he sent some Jewish elders on his behalf. He also knew that, for Jesus, entering the home of a gentile was problematic, because of purity or spiritual cleanliness – "... I am not worthy to have you come under my roof," he says. So he asks only that Jesus (quote) "speak the word, and let my servant be healed."

And then he points to the rules of his society, how things work, saying, "... I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me...."

In other words, everyone has a certain role, to play a role that helps ensure the best outcome. Everyone has someone over them to guide the process. The centurion answers to Rome, Jesus is aligned under God, and they both have people they call upon in getting things done. It works, for the Centurian, and it can work for us, relying on the process.

The centurion knew that if he followed and trusted the process, he would figure out the right solution, that being, faith in the restorative powers of Jesus. In fact, faith is the one thing that guaranteed success for the centurion – his faith. “Not even in Israel,” says Jesus, “have I found such a faith.” Trusting the process and having faith, now that’s a formula that adds up!

And yet, how often do we give up on the process and turn our back on faith. It’s no wonder when we can’t find the solution – if we’ve already decided it’s impossible. And yet, such doubt is understandable. Churches facing declining membership, families dealing with constant squabbling, individuals struggling to reinvent themselves – there are no easy solutions.

Like the most advanced mathematicians, we are charting new territory. And that’s scary; it can seem hopeless. But there is a way to ensure success, there is a way to not lose hope. **Trust the process and keep the faith.** This is the lesson Luke brings to us in the story of Jesus and the Centurian.

The centurion had no way to help his friend, his slave who was near death. So he trusted Jesus, and he trusted the process that brought him to Jesus. We as a church also have a sure way of achieving our goals – our calling – and that’s to trust in Jesus, and trust the process that brought us to Jesus in the first place, trust the church, and the rules and processes we follow as the church.

It’s the same with a family wanting to be less quarrelsome, to stop fighting all the time. They have to discover for themselves a way of drawing closer to one another, of trying new things. It’s the same for those wanting to reinvent themselves in the workforce or in retirement, or someone looking ahead toward college. There are a lot of variables and not all of them are going to work.

But as long as we trust the process and have faith that there is a solution, **we will arrive at the correct answer.** This church is in the process of coming up with some new things to try in the months ahead. I imagine some of them, you’ll be real excited about, others you may not be sure of, you may have to move forward on faith. And that’s OK. Being 100% certain isn’t what’s important.

What’s important is that we continue to try new things, continue to keep the faith, continue to draw together in Christ. That is what will lead us to the right solution, just as it has through all the years of this church. What’s important is we continue to have faith in the miraculous restoration and renewal that God has planned for us as faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Increase our faith, O God. The faith of the centurion in our scripture from Luke today was pure and true. He believed that you could heal and you healed.

Help our unbelief!

We put so much trust in modern medicine and human knowledge that we forget that you are the great healer, the great physician!

So, we ask you to heal those who are sick today. We believe that you can, and we ask you in faith, believing that you will.

We ask you to heal the hurting of our lives, too, Lord, to mend our broken hearts.

And while we wait for healing, we ask for faith to know that we are not forgotten, that you are not far off.

We pray all this in your name, remembering the words that you taught us, praying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we
forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**