

Has anyone ever said to you, "If you love me you'll do it"? Don't answer that because whatever it is you are supposed to do if you love that person is probably not something you should be doing.

Or perhaps you've felt like you're in someone's debt because they've done you a favor. You feel like, "You owe them one." Perhaps you've done someone else a favor and you feel like they're in your debt. You can call in that favor when you need it.

And who knows how many times mothers have said to their children, "Do you know how many hours I was in labor to deliver you." It is like some mothers think that gives them a lifetime annuity of control over their children.

Yes, relationships and manipulation often go hand in hand. But let's not get the idea that this is always bad. Have you ever done something for someone and they don't seem to

appreciate it? Maybe you gave a great gift and no thank you note arrived. Or maybe what you did was received with a sense of entitlement by the other person. If you do something for someone and it doesn't build your relationship or draw you closer then you have to seriously ask yourself about the health of that relationship. Is your commitment being exploited? Are you acting as an enabler?

All of this sets the stage for understanding our gospel reading for today. We meet a centurion -an officer in the Roman army who is in charge of about 100 foot soldiers. I don't know if there's an exact equivalent to his rank in the US Army today but I usually think of him as being like a major. There are both officers and enlisted men under him and plenty of officers above him - colonels and generals and the like. He has a beloved slave who is terminally ill, and Jesus heals the slave from a distance. Now, before we get too far into this I do want to make one note. A version of this story shows up in Matthew's gospel and in John's gospel. There are differences in each account as you'd expect by hearing this story from different points of view. But there is one really big difference in Luke. The centurion never actually meets Jesus. He does in the other gospels. Look closely and don't add in details that aren't

there. This whole miraculous healing occurs as if by remote control. The centurion sends some Jewish elders to ask Jesus to come to his house to heal the slave. They indeed approach Jesus and plead for him to come. But then when Jesus is on the way the centurion sends friends this time to tell Jesus not to be troubled. He somehow knows Jesus' healing powers are not limited only to his physical presence but can also work at a distance. Jesus then marvels at this man's faith and does indeed heal the slave from a distance.

There is an interesting contrast of relationships and manipulation happening in this story. Let's do the Jewish leaders first because their understanding is pretty standard and is the foil for the centurion.

It all starts when they approach Jesus asking him to help this centurion. Why do they ask Jesus to do this? As a favor to the centurion. And why do they think they owe the centurion a favor? We find out why in their conversation with Jesus, "... it is he who built our synagogue for us." It all becomes an exchange of favors. And they are essentially asking Jesus to do a favor for them; because he is known as a great preacher and

healer for Jews. They see themselves as offering this service that they have as Jews to this worthy non-Jewish centurion.

This is so ordinary a thing for us that it takes the centurion to make us realize it is a distorted relationship. Does the centurion say, "I'm worthy to have the Jewish healer come to my house because I've done nice things for Jews"? No. Someone he cares about is in great need and he asks for help from someone he knows can give it.

Is he being demanding by sending Jewish elders to Jesus rather than going himself? Is he being haughty when he says Jesus doesn't have to come to his house? No. He is being respectful. He's heard about Jesus. Jesus is a great and upright Jewish person. He does not want to ask Jesus to do anything that would defile him or make him unclean. Jesus entering into the house of a Roman risks ritual uncleanness. Just like today. I've met Jewish people who will not set foot inside this building. It feels unclean to them, and that's not a comment about the cleaning service. They just feel like it is a center of impurity that might taint them. As Christians we don't have this sense, at least we have no need to. You won't

be defiled or made unholy by going into a synagogue or mosque or a worship place of another faith. Space doesn't matter to us. We worship Christ, not holy places.

So this Roman is aware of this Jewish concern. Maybe the local Jews feel comfortable, but not this super-holy unknown man. So it is out of a deep and genuine respect that he neither has Jesus come to his home nor even talks to him directly.

This centurion seeks to be in relationship with Jesus and needs the benefit of that relationship but he does not try to get there by manipulation. He gets there by showing respect and honoring Jesus' power.

When Jesus realizes this he says to the crowd, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith," he is praising this centurion's confidence in his healing power. And I think he is also praising the centurion's methods.

Many people try to manipulate God. Many people try to bargain and make promises. You may remember me sharing this

story before. It was when I was a student at Penn State University and I was at a football game where we were playing against Miami. The game was not going well. And though it injures my Penn State pride to say it, Miami was simply a superior team. They had more talent and they were playing better. The guy in front of me starts to say many times, "God if we win this game I'll go to church tomorrow." How absurd is that!?! Is God really going to change the outcome of a football game because you've offered to go to church!?! If God needs you there that badly God has other ways to get you to church.

That gets at the real issue. What is the point of bargaining with God? Do you really think you have something of value that you can offer to God? Do you think you can give God something that God can't get elsewhere? You must think quite highly of yourself! God has everything God needs. In the Old Testament God says to the people several times - Do you think I *need* your worship? Do you think I *need* your sacrifices? I created it all. I don't *need* anything.

You can't bargain with God because you have no bargaining chips!

But that does not mean that you are helpless, worthless or in any way lacking. God made you in his image. God loves you and cares for you. God loves and cares enough for you to be crucified to have you. Do you see how your worth and your well-being - and your salvation - are all from God?

So when you pray be like the centurion. Let your thanks and your needs be known to God - simply, honestly, faithfully. God hears. And God responds. Maybe you won't get what you ask for. Maybe you will. But God does always give you what is needed. Amen