



Don Worden

Russell Myers, a man who I admired and with whom I had the pleasure of working in the Evangelical Friends Church-Eastern Region office, said something once that I have never forgotten. One day, during staff devotions, he said, “I am intrigued by the people who were comfortable in Jesus’ presence, and those who were not.”

I have thought about his comment many times through the years. The best-selling novel, *The Shack*, gets to that same idea from another angle, the idea that being a Christian is about being in a relationship with God.

We all believe that. We nod and say “amen” when preachers talk about the atonement having as one of its primary purposes the re-establishment of a relationship between sinful man and a holy God.

But Russell, in his unique way, made it so simple. Jesus’ relationships with people jump out of the pages of the New Testament. I want to look at the lives of some of the people Jesus encountered, explore their relationship (or lack of relationship) with him, and discover what their stories have to say to us today.

Carolyn and I continue to live in Dalton, Ohio, attend Canton First Friends Church; we enjoy our hobbies of wood burning and fan carving.

BIBLE READING: Matthew 8:5-13

I suppose it is difficult to say whether or not this centurion was comfortable in Jesus' presence. But he did have faith in Jesus' healing power. Of him Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith..."

The centurion had said that he did not deserve to have Jesus even enter his house!

From this story we can infer a couple things. First, the centurion understood something about Jewish practices, and apparently respected them. His comment about Jesus not entering his house was a polite way to allow Jesus to remain obedient to current Jewish custom. Second, for him to be greatly concerned about a servant (of all people) tells us that he was a man of some compassion. He did not call him a slave, but a servant.

Was this man an acquaintance of Cornelius? We do not know. What we do know is that here are two members of the Roman occupation forces who were unusual among their peers. Unusual and unique, and more open to Jesus than most Jews of that time.

What can we learn from this man? Rank, privilege, or circumstances played no part in his earnest plea for his servant. Actually, his ability to command those under his command had taught him something about faith.

How is your faith today? Perhaps we need to pray with the father of the demon-possessed boy in Mark 9:24, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

SONG: Only Believe

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, give me the kind of faith of this Roman centurion. And may I, with the father of the troubled youth, pray honestly, "Lord I believe; help me overcome my unbelief."

—Don Worden

BIBLE READING: Luke 19:1-9

Sometimes our “short” comings become our best assets. Zacchaeus was a short man. Was that why he became a tax collector? Had he been ridiculed, teased, and abused as a child? As a tax collector, being short was not a problem. With the might of Rome behind him, at least his fellow citizens feared and possibly respected him.

To say that Zacchaeus was comfortable in Jesus’ presence may be a bit of a stretch. And stretch he did, in order to even see Jesus. As a respected—or feared—member of the community, it would have been beneath his dignity to climb a tree, or even run ahead of the crowd to obtain his vantage point. But that’s what he did.

He was the most surprised person in the crowd when Jesus stopped and called him by name. What Zacchaeus did next was totally out of character. Why did he make the statement he did regarding restitution?

All we know is what Jesus said next, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.” Jesus knew what was being said about Zacchaeus and his “selling out” to the Romans. But he also knew why Zacchaeus climbed the tree. He knew this was not a publicity stunt, but rather the act of a desperate man. The real reason for Jesus’ invitation appears in verse 10: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

As always, the so-called “righteous” were uncomfortable in Jesus’ presence, and the honest seekers were not. Maybe there is a lesson for us here as well.

SONG: Rescue the Perishing

PRAAYER SUGGESTION: Like another fellow in the New Testament, let us be sure we have prayed, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

—Don Worden

BIBLE READING: Mark 5:21-24, 35-43

Was Jairus comfortable in Jesus' presence? It is clear that concern for his daughter overcame any misgivings or prejudices Jairus may have harbored. He was a member of the ruling class, probably at least a Pharisee, or even a Sadducee. Concern for his sick child made all his other concerns peripheral. We know that his care for his child overcame any prejudices or hesitancy to ask Jesus for a favor.

In Luke's chronology, this happened after the four friends lowered the paralytic down through the roof. That was in chapter 5; Luke records this incident in chapter 8. If this was the same town then Jairus could have been among those who witnessed the lowering of the man through the roof. What did he think then?

Theories and philosophies are one thing; real life is another. Often, we see it in reverse. We "say" we believe, but do we really believe when the chips are down, when we are in a tight spot, with a sick child, or parent? Are we, like Jairus, willing to say publicly, "Jesus, I need your help"? What if Jairus had been in the first crowd and witnessed the healing of the paralytic, and then criticized Jesus for what happened? After his daughter's encounter with Jesus, his attitude was different.

Have you had an encounter with Jesus? Has that encounter made a difference in your life? The tragedy would be that such an encounter left you unchanged, unconvinced. I hope you have had such an encounter and it changed you.

SONG: Trust and Obey

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Father, help me to realize what trusting you means in all circumstances of life.

—Don Worden

BIBLE READING: John 9:1-41

To call this man a “friend of Jesus” might be misleading. But if anyone was comfortable in Jesus’ presence, he was! After the miracle of sight restored, and his being thrown out of the synagogue, Jesus asked him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” His response, “Who is he, sir? Tell me so that I may believe in him.”

The irony of this story lies in who was blind, and who was not. Yes, he was born physically blind, but that was an easier problem for Jesus to deal with than spiritual blindness. This former blind man shows remarkable insight! He says, in response to the Pharisees’ rigorous questions, “Now that is remarkable! You don’t know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes...if this man were not from God he could do nothing.”

The tragedy is that the self-proclaimed righteous were unwilling to acknowledge the truth of what this man was saying. They were more concerned with tradition and theological “purity.” Seeing the truth with their own eyes only magnified their spiritual stubbornness and blindness. “Don’t confuse me with the facts; my mind is already made up!”

Orthodoxy and tradition can be wonderful. They provide parameters and bring balance and meaning to our everyday existence. They make us “comfortable.” But what happens when God wants to break through and reveal himself in new ways? Sometimes a little “shock treatment” is good for us. God will go to almost any length to establish a relationship with us. After all, he sent Jesus to a cross!

SONG: Open My Eyes, That I May See

PRAAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, deliver us from spiritual blindness. Help us see where you are at work in our world, and joyfully join you there.

—Don Worden

*BIBLE READING: Luke 10:38-42;
John 11:1-6, 20-27, 38-42*

Jesus and his disciples often found themselves sleeping out in the open. In Bethany, they would not have to.

These dear friends of Jesus give us some insight into those comfortable in his presence. Yet, they had their moments. Martha complained to Jesus about her sister. They were distraught over Lazarus, and Jesus' late arrival.

We don't know how or when they became his friends, his disciples. They did not travel with him. Instead, they welcomed him into their home, before and after Lazarus was raised from the dead. The transparency of Jesus' relationship with this trio gives insight into the human side of Jesus. At Lazarus' grave, he wept. He tenderly chided Martha about life's choices. He loved home cooking. (Anyway, I like to think so!)

What became of them after Jesus' resurrection? My "unauthorized version" says that they stayed close friends, in spite of his rebukes. Martha probably kept making the special dishes he loved, now for the disciples who passed through Bethany. Whatever part they played was not major; it never had been. They were his faithful friends, and continued to play that role throughout their lives. Perhaps they provided a haven for Peter, or Paul, or others of the disciples.

What about us? We "Friends" take our name from John 15: "You are my friends if you do what I command" (v. 13). Are we his "faithful friends?"

SONG: What a Friend We Have in Jesus

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Father, thank you for inviting us to be your friends. May we continue to be faithful and true to you and your cause.

—Don Worden

BIBLE READING: John 6:1-13

Calling the lad with the loaves and fishes a friend of Jesus would be stretching things just a bit. But—what a story he had when he went home that night! And, what about his mother, or his dad, or the rest of his family? Were they present at the miracle? If not, were they used to him coming home with outlandish tales?

All we know about this lad is in John 6:9 “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish...” Regardless, he was fascinated enough to surrender his lunch. For a hungry lad, that was saying a lot! Was he present at Pentecost? Was he a part of the Palm Sunday crowd, or the crowd saying, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!”

We know he had enough curiosity to listen to a speaker rather than explore some caves, or go fishing, or play some games with his friends. So whatever we say is pure speculation. The only other thing we know is that he was in the right place at the right time.

What about me? What about you? Sometimes the best thing we can do is the next thing. It may be just minding our own business, or doing our job in a way that pleases the boss and those with whom we work. Influence is “the act or power of producing an effect without apparent exertion of force or direct exercise of command.”

I’ve often wondered what happened to that lad, or what his folks said when he came home that evening.

SONG: Little Is Much When God Is in It

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Father, help me to be at my best for you, regardless of the situation or circumstances.

—Don Worden

BIBLE READING: Matthew 9:9-13

Our list of those comfortable in Jesus' presence does not include the disciples. They were part of his "in" crowd—the inner circle. However, Matthew (or Levi) doesn't fit the mold of the others. He was more like Zacchaeus, although there is no record of him having been a dishonest tax collector. He was just an "ordinary Joe" doing an ordinary job.

When Jesus walked by and said, "Follow me," he got up and followed. Because the Bible is silent about many other details, our imaginations can run rampant. Was it something in the tone of Jesus' voice? Had Matthew heard rumors about this fellow?

We know he threw a party, and the religious leaders didn't like it. In response to their criticism, Jesus reminded them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." Jesus came to seek and save the lost.

Our church has been through a transition recently; we have a new pastor. During the transition, many questions were raised and opinions voiced. I've been impressed, however, that during this transition we continue to see white carnations on the platform most Sundays.

These carnations represent people we know who have made decisions to become followers of Jesus—like Matthew. Often the witness of one of our lay people, in the ordinary course of life, has inspired that person's decision to become a believer. And that's remarkable.

Isn't that the way it is supposed to work?

SONG: I Have Decided to Follow Jesus

PRAAYER SUGGESTION: Father, thank you for the opportunity to observe Jesus and his interaction with those around him. May we learn from him how to make our witness as attractive to others.

—Don Worden