

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
8:00 and 10:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Second Sunday after Pentecost – May 29, 2016

“As Near as a Word”

Scripture: Luke 7:1-10

When my father was ill and near the end of his life, he found his healing in many unexpected quarters. While he was seen regularly by his doctor, and he had all the attention of the local health care industry, along with all the appointments and the poking and prodding and testing and pharmaceuticals that come with that, I'm not sure that this “hands-on” healing is where he gained his greatest strength nor where he found his deepest sense of wellness. For though my father lived in the same house for over fifty years, his experience and vision of the world were hardly bound to home, and he easily made friends and relations all over the world, bonds of affection with people of all ages that he had come to know over a lifetime of work and service with others for whom he cared and who cared for him. And my father knew they prayed for him. He knew they appealed to God for his well-being, wherever they were. He knew he had this support from friends near and far.

But, for all he knew, what I think really surprised him were the prayers for his healing that came from the people he did not know, from people he had never met, from the friends of friends told of his illness and asked by others to join in a large,

and largely unseen and unknown, body of faithful response to the needs of this one man, my dad. I know this “healing from a distance,” so to speak, had profound impact upon his health, because a letter was shared with me, a letter written by my father to a group of children he had never seen nor met, a letter which was a testimonial to the healing he was experiencing through the response of these unknown young ones. My father wrote to these children:

[I received your cards and messages, and] with them the day got sunnier and brighter. They warmed my heart. Smart little messages from [you] children I have never met but who obviously care. It is what helps us old folks keep going...

I still have that terminal cancer and am under Hospice care, but my health is not getting any worse at this point, and I have gained a few pounds, and my attitude is good and my faith strong. But it surely helps to get a little outside help, and what could be better than happy cards from happy youngsters. My sincere thanks to you... for all that you [have done].

Healing from a distance... I think of the Roman Centurion we meet in Luke’s gospel this morning, a soldier, strong and fierce, a leader of men, not even of the same faith of the Jews he governs, asking, not demanding, but asking Jesus for help. And Jesus... a man of the common people, a man he has never met, but who he has heard is faithful and powerful to heal. And not only does he ask Jesus’ help to heal a sick and highly valued servant in his household, but he humbly understands that Jesus can help without even coming into his home, without ever meeting the servant, because the bonds of faith established in the power of God are not limited by distance or time or anything else. “Only speak the word, Lord,” says the Centurion, “and let

my servant be healed.” And Jesus was earnestly surprised by the faith of this man he had neither seen nor met. And the servant was indeed healed... from a distance.

For all I know, I have never met our Lord face to face. There is much about our Christian faith that happens “from a distance,” I suppose. Yet I have been bound closely to Christ by faith since the moment I was born... through the faith of my parents, through the faith of my friends and the community that surrounded me. And even to this day, when I claim the Christian faith for my own, I am sustained by a larger community, people near and far, people I know well and people I have never met, who share the same hope as you and I, that God is present to this world, bringing good purpose to fruition, helping us to help others, healing us, and building in us the generous hearts that allow us to pray for the healing and well-being of others, those we know and those we will never meet.

Lots of people. Often I’m asked, “How large is your church, Father?” And I know what they would ask. A few hundred on a Sunday morning, I suppose, is the answer they seek. But that’s hardly the answer. Our church is not bound by locality, or distance, or time, or anything else. We ask that Jesus speak his word to us, and he is here. But not just here. For every person we touch, we impact a world of persons we may never see. The hundreds of Youth who receive life in Christ through TEC... they go out from this place to impact all others with whom they will live. The families

that pass through Edina and St. Stephen's Church for a time and go on to other places... don't you know they spread the bounds of our membership. (*I remember while in Pennsylvania, when I announced my call to serve with you, I was immediately approached by people in the congregation who had grown up in Edina and knew of the ministry of St. Stephen's Church.*)

When we pray together on a Sunday morning, there are people all over the world praying for us, members who have homes in other places, clergy who know some of you as friends, people whose lives are touched by our ministries with others, like Grant School families, or the Holy Cross school in Belize. And today we have the blessing and privilege of baptizing Beatrice Kathryn Rolph, and she has come here from Idaho, from St. Michael's Episcopal Cathedral, because her grandparents are in this faith community, and she has roots of family and faith here.

The Centurion understands that the power of God is not limited to the bounds of time and place. And in him Jesus recognizes great faith. We can exercise that same faith and call upon that same power of God for good in the life of others. As people who trust in Jesus, we are as close to each other as a word, our concern for each other as close as a prayer. So offer that prayer for friends, and friends of friends, and for those you have never seen. As David Steindl-Rast once wrote: "Abundance is not measured by what flows in, but by what flows over. The smaller we make the vessel of our need... the sooner we [give] the overflow..." (from *Synthesis* for May 29, 2016).