

January 16, 1972
Matthew 8:5-13 (N.E.)
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WHEN THE PROBLEM'S TOO BIG

Have you ever had a problem so big, so formidable, so complicated, that it seemed no person and no power could possibly help you solve it? Were you ever faced with a situation in which you could do little more than wring your hands, and cry within yourself, "What am I going to do? What am I going to do?"

If you have never been in such a predicament you are either very young or very fortunate, and there is a high degree of probability that you will, before many more settings of the sun, be confronted with such a problem. There are in every life some occasions when an irresistible force seems to meet an immovable object. Then what do we do?

The centurion in the gospel story had come up against precisely that kind of situation. One of his servants lay within his house suffering from palsy, or perhaps paralysis, and in great pain. A centurion was a Roman soldier in charge of one hundred men. He was a Gentile and the Jews considered it unclean to enter a Gentile household. But for some reason he had heard of Jesus and with love and compassion for his young servant he came, in humility, asking Jesus for help.

His words were full of pathos, "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home in terrible distress." The centurion asks for nothing; he merely states the case. Why should this Jewish teacher care about a Roman centurion and his gentile servant? But Jesus says, "I will come," or perhaps asks, "Shall I come?"

Now we arrive at the significant part of the story. The centurion, as a soldier, has authority. A Roman soldier could, if he so desired, order a Jew to carry his pack for a mile. From that law Jesus derived his ethical precept, "Go the second mile." The centurion in effect says to Jesus, "I am a man of authority. I can say to this man, 'Go', and he goes. I can say to that man, 'Come', and he comes. I can do many things, but now I've come across a problem that's too big for me. I am not worthy to have you come under my Gentile roof. You just say the word and my servant shall be healed. You have the spiritual authority."

Is it any wonder that Jesus responded, "Not even in Israel among all the Jews have I found such faith"? He says to the centurion, "Go, and it shall be as you have believed." And Matthew and Luke record that at that moment the servant was healed.

II

Well, unfortunately many of us are very adept at taking our problems to God only when they get too big for us to handle. We may even take them to the physician, the psychiatrist, the clergyman first, and hold God in reserve to the very end. That is what seems to be happening when in the midst of a crisis someone finally concludes, "All we can do now is pray." We have finally admitted that the problem is too big for us, that we are at the end of our rope and we had better hand it over to God.

A prim little old lady was telling a friend about the severe shock that she as a life-long temperance advocate had experienced when she found two empty whiskey bottles in her garbage can. "You can't imagine my embarrassment," she said. "I didn't want the garbage man to think I drank." "What did you do with them?" asked the friend. "Well, the minister lives next door," was the reply, "so I put them in his garbage can. Everybody knows he doesn't drink."

Don't we often do the same thing with our problems and difficulties? When we can't handle them ourselves any longer we take them to someone else in the desperate hope that they may have more authority, more experience, more understanding and insight than we have.

But, you see, there is a difference in such an event between us and the centurion. He came in faith and trust; we often come in desperation and because there is no place else to go. We ought to turn to God because there is no better place to go, not because there is no other place to go.

III

To be sure, religion can and ought to be a restorer of mental, spiritual and physical health. For Jesus it was that and he regularly illustrated the positive affects of a strong faith by healing those who came to him.

But far more important, it would seem to some of us, is the power of religion to be a preventative of mental, spiritual and physical illness. Jesus also emphasized this aspect of the spiritual life. One can be relatively certain that most of us would rather prevent our sickness and pain than seek for a cure for it after we have been struck down. An ounce of prevention is indeed more valuable than a pound of cure, valuable as the latter may be.

If we emphasize the power of the religious life to prevent man's diseases and distresses we begin to learn that there is no problem too big for man and God to handle together. You will remember the story of the man who referred to his beautiful farm lands and said, "You should have seen all this when God had it alone." God has indeed created the kind of world in which he needs the cooperation

of man. But he has also created the kind of world wherein man desperately needs God. The problems just get too big. We can't face them and overcome them without His help.

Unfortunately, many people go their way blithely ignoring religion, ignoring prayer, ignoring God, ignoring the church, until one day their whole world seems to collapse around them and they want an instantaneous answer on how to achieve sanctity and sainthood and salvation in one easy lesson.

During the past week I received a letter from another city from a young woman who wrote that she had now come full circle, and whereas in the past she had pretty much assumed she could do what she pleased when she pleased and if she pleased, now she found herself searching for some deeper answers to the meaning of life. Could I, she asked, tell her how to pray and how to make God real?

Well, I could tell her. The question is, is she yet ready and willing to heed what I tell her? One doesn't usually give up one way of life, and then suddenly, because he desires it, find God "nearer to him than breathing and closer than hands and feet." Developing prayer as a significant spiritual technique and making God real in life usually takes many years of discipline and training if it is to be anything more than a temporary emotional experience.

IV

Yes, there are times in life when the problem is just too big for us to handle alone. If we haven't discovered that yet, the time is coming when we will discover it. When a man bursts into my office, the tears streaming down his face, and announces that his wife has cancer, he is confessing that the problem is too big for him. When a mother comes in to tell me that her son has been killed in Vietnam she is declaring that that problem is too big for her. When college students commit suicide they declare to the whole world that the problem got too big. When your mate of fifty years dies and you are suddenly terribly alone, you know that the problem is too big without God.

Is turning to God, searching for God, leaning on the everlasting arms, a sign of weakness? No, it is facing the reality of our humanness. A man may cry, "I am a self-made man", and thereby take a great burden of responsibility off the shoulders of the Lord. But if he tries to go through life wholly on his own powers and abilities, he will eventually self-destruct. The problem will get too big for him.

V

One wonders where the centurion in the New Testament story got his faith and his confidence in Jesus. Had he seen Jesus perform other miracles? Had he heard of him through others? We cannot possibly

know. But this we can know, he was a man of humility and compassion. It took humility for a Roman centurion to beg for help from an itinerant Jewish teacher. He was a man of compassion and pity who cared about his servant more than he cared about his pride.

Do you and I have compassion and pity on a sick and needy world? Then we must turn to God whose power alone can heal that world. Does your pride prevent you from turning to God and seeking his help? Then your pride and vanity stand in the way to your becoming the kind of person God could help you become.

With compassion, pity and humility we will be able to face whatever may come, and with God's help, claim the tribute Paul claimed for himself: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith."