

## **Virtual Healing**

**Luke 7:1-10**

**5/29/2016**

Therapists are using virtual reality technology to help heal soldiers suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The centurion in this week's text uses the virtual reality treatment of faith to invite Jesus to heal his servant.

### **Jesus is a healer**

Natasha Young was a spirited and proud young Marine when she went to Iraq several years ago as a member of a close-knit unit tasked with disabling IEDs (improvised explosive devices, also known as roadside bombs) before they could be detonated by the enemy and kill or injure friendly troops. The unit was always busy at this highly stressful and dangerous work.

Staff Sgt. Young did two tours in Iraq, and, on the second tour of duty, six of her fellow Marines were killed when the bombs they were diffusing went off. Each death was a staggering punch to the gut for her and the rest of the unit. The unit's commander took his own life after they returned home. Young broke down physically, emotionally and mentally and was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which led to a medical discharge from the Marine Corps.

"I was ashamed of myself," says Sgt. Young; once a strong warrior who could now no longer function. She is not alone. Of the 2.4 million Americans who have been fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan for a decade, nearly a quarter of a million have been diagnosed with PTSD, while many more remain undiagnosed. Left untreated, veterans risk a downward spiral that can lead to substance abuse, depression, anger and even suicide. Untreated PTSD tends to reinforce the original trauma, and the more soldiers try to forget it, the more likely it becomes embedded in their psyche.

A new treatment is emerging, however, that may help veterans like Sgt. Young deal with their memories in a more helpful way. It's called "Virtual Iraq," and it helps war veterans process their trauma openly by immersing them in a high-tech, virtual-combat environment that mirrors the environment of combat, complete with the sounds of gunfire and explosions, the sight of

people in the streets, and even the smells of the battlefield, like burning rubber, cordite from spent shells, and rotting garbage on the street.

Before entering the virtual battlefield, the veteran recounts his or her experiences to a therapist and discusses whether he or she is ready to deal with them. When the veteran is ready, the therapist fits him or her with virtual reality goggles and earphones and gives the veteran eight exposures to the scene of their trauma -- a buddy getting hit by a grenade, for example. The scene is played out in detail, including all the associated sights, sounds and smells. The more the veteran can recount the event and talk about it after each session, the less deep the trauma is buried in the veteran's psyche and the more likely he or she is able to be freed from its grip. As one soldier put it after going through the therapy, "The war will never leave me, but now I know I can handle it." The treatment has produced some hopeful results. A recent study revealed that 12 of 15 veterans who underwent the treatment over 12 weeks no longer met the criteria for PTSD.

We might think of these kinds of technologies as a means of virtual healing -- a chance for broken people to imagine a different kind of world that leads them from focus on the past to hope for the future. Training ourselves to think differently and face our traumas head-on helps us to deal with them with hope rather than despair.

### **The Centurion in today's text is in crisis.**

The centurion in this week's text was dealing with his own trauma. His most valued slave was ill and close to death (v. 2). The centurion was likely a commander in the army of Herod Antipas rather than a Roman soldier. We can infer this since Capernaum was a minor trade center and toll station along the Via Maris, which was the trade route that led from the countries in the Fertile Crescent down to the Mediterranean. While Capernaum was not a combat post, the centurion was nonetheless a military veteran who may have seen his share of combat earlier in his career. If that were the case, then his slave would likely have been right beside him in the thick of battle, thus forging a relationship that was less master and slave and more like comrades in arms. Losing his best slave would be like losing a battle buddy, to use the modern Army term.

## **The Centurion adopts a vision of a different future**

For starters, rather than wallowing in grief and replay the potential loss over and over, however, the centurion decides to adopt a vision of a different future made possible by the presence of Jesus in Capernaum that day (v. 1). The centurion had heard about Jesus and, no doubt, about the miracles he had performed in the town, like healing a man with an unclean spirit right there in the synagogue for which the centurion himself had given a lot of money (Luke 4:31-37).

Unlike most of the Gentile soldiers, Roman or otherwise, who were stationed in the notoriously revolutionary region of Galilee, this centurion actually had a soft spot for the Jews, not only building the synagogue for them (the foundation of which still stands in the ruins of Capernaum) but also going so far as to love the Jewish people (7:5). The centurion already saw the world differently than many of his peers, and his imagination allowed him to formulate a different vision of reality about the Jews and about the itinerant Jewish preacher and healer who was now back in town.

Still, he recognized that there was a separation between him and the Jews. He wants his servant to be well, so he sends some of the Jewish elders to speak with Jesus about his servant, knowing that a pious Jew like Jesus could not enter a Gentile house. The Jewish elders see this generous Gentile as a "worthy" candidate for a healing miracle (v. 4), but the centurion believes himself to be "not worthy" to have Jesus come under his roof (v. 6).

## **The Centurion Knows That It**

The centurion believes that it isn't necessary for Jesus to be physically present in order to heal. Rather, it's Jesus' virtual presence -- his presence in spirit through faith -- that really matters to him. The centurion can imagine a world where his slave and comrade can be made well through a virtual healing.

Indeed, as a commander of men, the centurion knows that he doesn't need to be present in order to get things done. He gives an order and it is obeyed, even in his absence (v. 8). He has faith that his orders will be executed, and he now assumes that Jesus has the same kind of spiritual

authority. All Jesus has to do is say the word and his healing order will be carried out. The centurion imagines another reality made possible by Jesus, and then acts on it.

### **Too Often We Give Into The Trauma**

Jesus is surprised at this Gentile centurion's ability to imagine a different outcome. "Not even in Israel have I found such faith," Jesus says (v. 9). Maybe Jesus is surprised because too often we, like embattled soldiers, give into the trauma of our circumstances, our sin, our brokenness, and find ourselves in a downward spiral of negative thinking that replays the trauma over and over again. Faith, on the other hand, can lift us toward a vision of a different future. Even if we do not receive a miraculous healing, a restoration of a relationship, or the satisfactory resolution of any of a thousand other circumstances in which we might find ourselves, faith invites us to begin moving, even if only a bit at a time, toward wholeness away from the downward spiral of despair.

### **We Cannot Stop the Cycle On Our Own**

One of the major breakthroughs that soldiers must accomplish if they are going to manage their PTSD is to recognize that they cannot stop the cycle on their own. The same can be said for those who may be dealing with addictions, habitual patterns of sin or any other life trauma. Like the centurion, we need to be willing to ask for help, even if we feel unworthy of it. Jesus specializes in dealing with patients who believe they are unworthy or, like Sgt. Young, ashamed of themselves. Jesus will take on the rough case, the deeply buried trauma, with healing grace. All we have to do is reach out in faith, to bring the hurt to the surface, and allow him to meet us there.

### **We Can Be The Healing Presence**

We remember, though, that faith in Christ isn't just a spiritual reality. It's faith lived out in relationship to others in the body of Christ. The truth is that we can be the healing presence of Christ to each other, helping one another move toward health. We don't need to be trained therapists or techno-wizards, just people who are willing to listen and be comrades who link arms with one another as we move through tough times. We all need people who

can speak into our lives and be the physical presence of the spiritual reality of Christ among us. We are members of one Body, says the apostle Paul, and the members should have "the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it" (1 Corinthians 12:25-26). The Jewish elders in Capernaum saw the Gentile centurion as a neighbor and wanted to alleviate his suffering by going to Jesus. Can we be agents of healing for each other in the same way, acting as intercessors and faith-walkers for those around us?

Who do you know who is struggling with trauma? How can you be an advocate, a virtual healer, a representative of Christ? How can you help others envision a different sort of outcome for the brokenness in their lives? And if you are the one who is suffering, whom can you ask for help? How will you take the step of faith not only to trust Jesus to heal you, but also trust the members of his Body to intercede and advocate for you?

The writer of Hebrews says, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," (11:1). It is the virtual reality that allows us to see the world through the lens of Christ!

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In today's scripture Jesus heals the servant of a centurion, an officer in Rome's occupation forces and most likely, a gentile.

### **Luke 7:1-10**

#### **Common English Bible:**

After Jesus finished presenting all his words among the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion had a servant who was very important to him, but the servant was ill and about to die. When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to Jesus to ask him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they earnestly pleaded with Jesus. "He deserves

to have you do this for him," they said. "He loves our people and he built our synagogue for us."

Jesus went with them. He had almost reached the house when the centurion sent friends to say to Jesus, "Lord, don't be bothered. I don't deserve to have you come under my roof. In fact, I didn't even consider myself worthy to come to you. Just say the word and my servant will be healed. I'm also a man appointed under authority, with soldiers under me. I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and the servant does it."

When Jesus heard these words, he was impressed with the centurion. He turned to the crowd following him and said, "I tell you, even in Israel I haven't found faith like this." When the centurion's friends returned to his house, they found the servant restored to health.

May God add a blessing to the reading, hearing and understanding of this holy Word.