

The Chain

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Luke 7:1-10

In Dodie Smith's great children's novel *The One Hundred and One Dalmatians* which was followed by the Disney movie decades later the mean Cruella de Vil manages to steal a litter of fifteen Dalmatian puppies from a household – in particular from their canine mother and father – Pongo and Missis -- because she wants to make out of them a Dalmatian skin coat for herself. She has swept them away out of London to her dark mansion about a hundred miles away in Suffolk. The human beings in the story are at a loss for what to do with no idea how to track these puppies down – and that's when Pongo and Missis go to work starting up the Twilight Bark. In the story the Twilight Bark is this communication chain from dog to dog that human beings find rather annoying – their dogs apparently barking at nothing at twilight – but what they don't know is that in the Twilight Bark an important message is being delivered from one neighborhood to the next, one town to the next and one breed of canine to another – from Dalmatian to German Shepherd to Poodle to Schnauzer to Terrier to Great Dane – it doesn't matter the breed – what matters is that there is a dog in trouble – in this case fifteen dogs – and help is needed to find them. One dog barks to another dog who barks to another dog – all on behalf of their fellow dogs who are in trouble. The Twilight Bark.

The Twilight Bark is what came to mind when twenty years ago I was leading a tour of folks to Israel and we were in Jerusalem. This was the day when we were to tour the old city and make our way down the Via Delarosa – the way of the cross. There were fifty of us and shortly after we got started one of our fifty (I will call her Sally) took on one of those

quick and virulent stomach viruses. Sally was sick and couldn't go on and needed to go back to the hotel. But there were fifty of us being led by our one guide. The bus had left us for the day. How is this going to work? This was before cell phones (yes, there was a time before cell phones) so it wasn't as easy as making an Uber call. What to do?

Now our guide had been guiding for a long time – she knew the city like the back of her hand – and she had friends – mostly shopkeepers spread across the quarters of Jerusalem. Most of you know that the Old City of Jerusalem is divided into quarters – the Jewish Quarter, the Muslim Quarter, the Armenian Quarter and the Christian Quarter. She had friends in all the Quarters and so she told our group to stay put for fifteen minutes while she took care of Sally. And what she did was she took Sally to her closest shopkeeper friend in the Jewish Quarter and said to him that she needed him to get Sally to her hotel outside Jerusalem – and could he pass Sally over to her friend in the Muslim Quarter and tell him to pass her along to her friend in the Christian Quarter and ask her to get her into a taxi so she could get to the hotel. Now I'm not sure what Sally thought about all this – but when you have a stomach virus you'll take any help you can get. So into the care of very different strangers Sally was placed with every little bit of hope and trust she had – and sure enough from one very different neighbor to the next – from the Jewish Quarter to the Muslim Quarter to the Christian Quarter Sally got delivered back to the comfort of her hotel – and in particular the comfort of her hotel commode. Not quite the Twilight Bark – it was the human chain. Our American sister is ill and despite our Quarters, despite our cultures, despite our ethnicities – we will see that she gets to where she needs to be.

Now all of this comes to mind when I think of the story I just read about this Galilean town called Capernaum. It's not a very big town up there close to the Sea of Galilee. But not unlike a lot of Palestinian towns back in the day – it was a

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town that had a lot of divides. Since Palestine was an occupied territory of the Roman Empire there existed within a town like Capernaum some inherent tensions between Romans and Palestinians – the occupiers and the occupied. There existed tensions between the Jews and the Gentiles. And there existed a division between free and slave. Gentile slaves, Jewish slaves. There were all sorts of reasons not to get along. But strangely there seemed to be some getting along anyway. Some getting along anyway. It turns out that a certain fondness sprung up between the folks at the local synagogue – and the Roman centurion down the road. Hear that: the local synagogue and the Roman centurion. Jew/Gentile, Occupied/occupier, civilian/ Military – somehow, somehow a fondness broke out. It was the centurion who had helped his good Jewish neighbors to build their synagogue. Some of us have been to Capernaum and have stood on top of the foundation of the synagogue that this centurion helped build. Maybe he helped dig the footings. Maybe he procured some building materials. Maybe he was the foreman of the project. Maybe he got the permits approved at the county. But the good folks from the synagogue were grateful for their Gentile occupier

friend. And so it was this gratitude that quickened their hearts when they got the word that the centurion's slave for which he held again a certain fondness – was ill unto death. What can we do?

Is it possible, the centurion asked, if the rabbi Jesus can do anything? There had been reports of his healing touch. So on behalf of their Gentile occupier friend and his slave – the Jewish elders interceded with Jesus and asked if he could do something? So Jesus across all the divides, across all the quarters, Jesus made his way. And that's when he came across a crowd of the Gentile community, friends of the centurion, bringing message from the Roman, this man of certain rank, that he was not worthy to have the rabbi come under his roof. But he believed nonetheless. Just give the command, was the centurion's message. I know about commands, Jesus. Just give the command and you can make my slave well.

Now to this request comes from Jesus a curious response. Not having laid eyes on the centurion, nor seeing face to face the sick slave – Jesus turns to the crowd and says simply this: “I tell you, not even in Israel have I seen such faith.” Now to be sure Jesus is speaking of the faith of the centurion

whose desperate faith is willing to believe that this upstart rabbi could possibly do something. Not even in Israel have I seen such faith. But don't you wonder if Jesus is speaking to more than that? Because in between Jesus and the centurion and the slave – there is this chain. This human chain. This twilight bark – that has somehow transcended all the possible divides and quarters and cultures and stations of life. Oh, they have most certainly believed in Jesus – but they have also most certainly believed in each other. Not even in Israel have I seen such faith.

Maybe this is the story that Peter has in mind when a couple years later he gets word of a centurion way up in Caesarea who wants to see him. A Gentile, Roman, occupier military man. And Peter is prompted by the Holy Spirit to go and see him. And when he gets there Peter reminds him, “You know, it is out of bounds for me to be here, to associate with Gentile, Roman, occupier, military people – you know it doesn't get any worse than this. We've got this grand canyon here – but somehow it is the Holy Spirit who wants somehow for us to be links in the chain. To experience a transcendent fondness. For God shows, Peter will say to that centurion, God shows no partiality. There is a transcendent fondness seeking to be at work here. That while there are different races, different cultures, different ethnicities, different stations of life – it is our common creator who has made us into a common humanity.

It makes me think of the account in Sebastian Junger's book *A Perfect Storm* where he describes the devastation of the century's worst storm that came up the eastern seaboard back in October of 1991. And in it he tells of a helicopter rescue crew attempting to save out in the Atlantic ocean a small sailboat and its crew and in the storm are forced to ditch their own craft off the coast of New Jersey ... and when word gets out that there is a rescue crew has ditched their helicopter and are lost at sea, Junger describes what happens: “Within minutes of the ditching, rescue assets from Florida to

Massachusetts are being readied for deployment. The response is massive and nearly instantaneous. At 9:48, thirteen minutes into it, Air Station Cape Cod launches a Falcon jet and an H-3 helicopter. Half an hour later a Navy P-3 jet at Brunswick Naval Air Station is requested and readied. A Coast Guard cutter, The Tamaroa has diverted before the helicopter has even gone down. At 10:23, Boston requests a second Coast Guard cutter, the Spencer. They even consider diverting an aircraft carrier.” All this for what? For a small crew of fellow human beings. No color check. No nationality check. No political party check. Just a small crew of human beings. The human chain. The twilight bark.

Colson Whitehead's recent and most compelling novel, *The Underground Railroad*, tells the tale of Cora and Caesar, African-American slaves in the days before the Civil War – and how in their desperate run from bondage they meet up with people of a different color who serve as stops on the Underground Railroad. And we know enough about our history to know how these human beings at stations along the Underground Railroad – houses, barns, churches - put themselves in the gravest danger when it came to their fellow human beings. One link in the chain connecting to another. Linked in a common humanity, born out of common creator. Not even in Israel have I seen such faith.

It should be no surprise then to hear of the research completed recently by Dr. Ayelet Fishbach of the University of Chicago who reports that when people in conflict sit down at a common meal – and more importantly share a common food – they are more likely and more quickly to find agreement than when they don't. That when they see each other share the same sustenance they see in each other their common humanity.

And maybe that's what Jesus had in mind when he gathered his disciples at table to eat with him from their common meal. Nothing like breaking bread together to get beyond the petty denials and betrayals afoot. Their common Passover Seder

now handed to us as the Lord's Supper. The bread and cup. Can't get more basic than that. But in our common feast a common humanity. A common hunger. A common thirst. At this table there is no culture. No class. No color. No citizen. No non-citizen. No nationality. No orientation. No partiality. Instead, a transcendent fondness. Neither male nor female. Neither Jew nor Greek. Neither slave nor free. For we are One in Christ Jesus. And Christ Jesus is One for the world.

And maybe through that chain. That twilight bark. That transcendent fondness – healing from the good physician.



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 Church of the Palms

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