

# biblestudy: april 2016

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

## April 3, 2016 Text: Luke 7:1-10 “Renewed Health”

Have you ever read a biblical text and suddenly seen something you had missed when you previously studied those verses? That has happened to me because of a glitch in my computer skills. I had written this week’s commentary but somehow lost it from my computer. So, I am writing it a second time and this time something new just popped out at me.

At the heart of these verses is the willingness of the leaders of the synagogue to go to Jesus on behalf of the centurion. I got to wondering. Are they going to bat for him because he is someone with a need or they going to bat for him because he has been generous with them? What if he were stingy? (See Luke 7:5.)

Then, there is this possibility. Maybe the centurion has helped the community build a synagogue because he wanted a strong religious community...or maybe he has done this to gain some favors among the influential Jewish rabbis. (See Luke 7:3.)

And why did the centurion want the servant healed? Were they close and loyal to each other? Was the servant of great financial value to the centurion? (See Luke 7:2.)

If Jesus could heal the servant from a distance, why did he start walking to the centurion’s house? (See Luke 7:6.) Why did the centurion feel

he had to let Jesus know just how important he (the centurion) was in the Roman army? (See Luke 7:7-8.)

The Jewish elders testify that the centurion deserves to have his servant healed (Luke 7:4), but the centurion protests that he is not worthy and does not deserve the help of Jesus (Luke 7:7). Well, which is it? Then, does the servant even know that there are those who seek his healing?

That’s a lot of questions. But, truth to tell, even when we acknowledge the power of Jesus to heal, we are left with a handful of things that are not clear. Why is one healed and another not? What is the difference between curing and healing? Where do we find Jesus’ healing power today? What is the connection between faith and healing? The bottom line in this story is the gift of healing. That’s always a mystery for which we give thanks.

### What Someone Else Has Said:

Ken and Pat Birt (*A Journey of Love and Miracles*, iUniverse) have written: “Friends and family are part of God’s greatest gift. Let them know what they can do to help when you are in need.”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Great and generous Healer...”

## April 10, 2016 Text: Luke 7:36-50 “A Reversal of Shame”

This week’s study text is about forgiveness. The New Testament word for “forgive” is *aphiēmi*, which literally means “to send away.” I must confess that sometimes when I forgive someone who has wronged me, I “send away” the wrong, but I still know where to find it!

Jesus has gone to have dinner with a Pharisee (Luke 7:36). Although Pharisees are often seen as opponents of Jesus—particularly when they align themselves with the scribes, the legal authorities—Jesus does not seem to hesitate in accepting the invitation. Perhaps we can learn something about staying in touch with those with whom we disagree!

The woman’s behavior seems bizarre (Luke 7:37-38). We learn that she is so loving toward Jesus because her many sins have been forgiven (7:47). I am left to wonder if the Church today ever behaves in a way that seems strange to the world. Does the Church today gladly receive persons the world would reject? Does the Church today spend its money in ways that seem as wasteful as “perfumed oil in a vase made of alabaster” (7:37)? Sometimes, if I am speaking to a church council, I say, “If every decision you make makes good sense to the world, then you have probably made a few wrong decisions.” This woman’s behavior does indeed seem bizarre.

Do you sometimes wonder if Jesus would love you if Jesus knew everything about you? In this account, it is clear that Jesus does indeed know

about the woman’s past—“her many sins” (7:47)—and yet He celebrates that she has known forgiveness (7:48). Now, to be clear, this is no invitation to kick our sinning up a notch so there will be more forgiveness! Paul spoke to that: “Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means!” (Romans 6:1-2). Recall what Jesus said to another woman whose sin was quite public, the woman caught in adultery: “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again” (John 8:11b).

When the incident is over, we do not know if the host, Simon, has understood what Jesus has been teaching about forgiveness. Maybe more to the point, when we finish studying this text, what would be the evidence that we have understood and received what Jesus was teaching?

### What Someone Else Has Said:

Pope Francis (*The Name of God Is Mercy*, Random House) has said: “...mercy is the divine attitude which embraces; it is God’s giving himself to us, accepting us, and bowing to forgive. Jesus said he came not for those who were good, but for the sinner...Mercy is God’s identity card....So mercy is deeply connected to God’s faithfulness.”

**Prayer:** As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of mercy and grace, my journey has had detours that ignored You and hurt others; forgive me and grant a new beginning...”

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April 17, 2016 Text: Luke 8:26-36, “A Sound Mind”

This text is full of images and descriptions that seem very strange to our twenty-first century understandings. We speak more of psychosis than we do of demons. We think of pigs as the source of a breakfast meat more than as suicidal pork. And people who hear voices? Here is Jesus having a conversation with an invisible legion of demons.

Nevertheless, these verses depict circumstances that we still recognize. Persons with mental illness sometimes act in ways beyond their own self-understanding. Other folks in society don’t always know how to relate to persons with mental illness. Mental disturbance is indeed not a personality trait so much as it is a disorder that needs healing.

All of this is interesting, but something new jumped out at me when I read this text this morning. In Luke 8:27, this “certain man” is naked and homeless. In Luke 8:35, the man is fully clothed. I got to wondering: where did he get clothes to wear?

Did he have a shirt and trousers hidden away? Did someone in the village offer to help him? Was some by-stander so embarrassed by the man’s nakedness that he rushed to Goodwill and bought some second-hand garments? Perhaps Jesus has an extra tunic tucked away in his travel-bag. The text does not give us a clue.

But this got me to wondering. Who is the mystery person who got this

April 24, 2016 Text: Luke 15:11-24 “A Family Reunion”

Familiar stories are often the most difficult to study. We get the sense of “Been there/Done That.” Certainly, this week’s study text of the prodigal son (or the waiting father, as some call it) is one of the best known in the New Testament.

Three characters usually are the focus of our reflection on this story: the father, the elder son, and the younger son. The father is a “good guy;” the younger son comes out “smelling like a rose;” the older son appears to be something of a grump. I asked one friend “What do you think of when you hear this story?” He said, “By today’s standards, the older son got a bum rap.”

I’d like to ponder a bit some other people in this narrative, some folks who are seemingly just background posters. Luke 15:22 introduces them: “But the father said to his servants...” He tells them to get the robe and ring and sandals that will honor and reward the returned son. What do you think the servants thought about all this?

Of course, they were not free to question their boss, but they must have thought he had lost a few marbles. The elder son had been around the place, doing his share of the work load, something the servants would admire. The younger son had “been off to Vegas” and what happened there has not stayed there; the servants have heard the son’s confession. These servants are people who are accustomed to hard work; they surely appreciate the good son and “tsk tsk” the wild adventures of the younger son.

man clothed? How often are the helping agents in our journey people we do not know! When have I been the one whose simple smile or handshake or conversation or day at the food kitchen or gift to the homeless shelter made a difference? And who has aided me and I never knew it?

Perhaps part of the healing of this mentally ill man has come from some neighbor who helped by providing the clothes. Perhaps part of the healing ministry of our Lord has been manifest not just in the miracle of what Jesus did, but also in the loving, caring response of the community, a community willing to give this man a second chance, a community who “completed the picture” by providing clothes. Jesus and community: not as bad combination!

**What Someone Else Has Said:** In *Convictions* (Harper One), Marcus Borg has written: “A primary quality of a life deeply centered in God is growth in compassion....God’s primary quality is compassion; therefore, a life centered in God will be compassionate.”

**Prayer:**  
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Open my eyes, Lord, to see the need that others have and to see that need as indeed You do...”

This leads me to wonder if I sometimes resent the abundant love of God...not when that love is given me, but when that love, forgiveness, grace, mercy, and peace is given to someone I deem a bit “suspect” because of their theology or politics or (shudder) sports allegiance. I am, of course, like the servants, just a bystander-observer, someone not directly affected by what I see. I am not the elder son nor the younger son. I’m just someone who thinks he knows better than the father. God should not be so careless with God’s grace. Don’t you think I could do a better job determining who gets forgiven, who gets a second chance, who gets God’s free bounty? Hmmm.

**What Someone Else Has Said:**  
Cal and Rose Samra (*More Holy Humor, Guideposts*) quote W. O. Taylor’s version of the text: “His foresighted father figured, ‘Such filial fidelity is fine, but what forbids fervent festivities? The fugitive is found! Unfurl the flags! With fanfare flaring, let fun, frolic, and frivolity flow freely, former failures forgotten and folly forsaken. Forgiveness forms a firm foundation for future fortitude.’”

**Prayer:**  
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “I’m back home, O Lord...”

Re-Energize Your Prayer Life With A New Practice

By Joe Iovino\*

Learning to pray is like learning to ride a bicycle. What we can learn from a book or class is not enough. Spending a day or season invigorating your prayer life is time well spent. Experiment with some new-to-you ways of praying.

**Breath Prayer:** Breath prayers are another way to become more aware of God's presence. The Holy Spirit is as near as the air we breathe. A common way to practice breath prayer is silently repeating a single-line prayer with each breath. As you inhale address God with something like, “Jesus, Son of God.” Then, as you exhale, express a request to God such as, “be merciful to me, a sinner.” Other examples are, “Creator God, allow me to see your beauty around me,” “Holy Spirit, let me feel your joy,” “O Lord, show me your way,” and “Holy One, heal me.” Repeat the prayer with each breath for several minutes. Listen for God.

**Praying scripture:** Another great source of prayer is the Bible. Praying the scriptures has a long tradition among the faithful. Prayerfully read a passage by stopping every line or so, and praying what comes to mind. This can stretch us to bring before God petitions we might not think of on our own. Praying the Psalms, for example, calls us to address every emotion. Praying Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) will lead us in prayer for the poor and oppressed. Many scriptures such as Jesus’ healings and parables, Paul’s letters, and others, may deeply speak to our needs, help us to praise, or remind us of a promise of God.

**Pray by checking in with God:** You may also pray by simply checking in with God at the end of the day. As you might call a friend or family member just to chat about what is going on in your life, you can have the same conversation with God.

Excerpted from *Re-energize your prayer life with a new practice.* \*Joe Iovino works for UMC.org at United Methodist Communications.