

Second Sunday after Pentecost; June 19, 2022

+ Luke 7:1-10 +

“Authoritative Word, Marvelous Faith”

After Jesus had finished saying all these things to the people who were listening, he went into Capernaum. A centurion’s servant, who was valuable to him, was sick and about to die. When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they begged him earnestly, saying, “He is worthy of having you do this for him, because he loves our nation, and he built our synagogue for us.”

Jesus went with them. When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to tell Jesus, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, because I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I am also a man placed under authority, having soldiers under me. I say to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goes; and to another one, ‘Come!’ and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

When Jesus heard these things, he was amazed at him. He turned to the crowd that was following him and said, “I tell you, I have not found such great faith, even in Israel.” And when the men who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.

It is hard to surprise Jesus. It is hard to amaze him. It rarely happens. But today it does. It’s the story of a centurion asking for healing for his servant – and, mostly, how he asks. This centurion amazes Jesus; he causes the Son of God to marvel. But it’s not just the story of a man’s faith. It’s also the story of what prompts his faith, what it is about Jesus that calls forth this faith. It’s a story of authoritative word and marvelous faith.

We are in Capernaum, up in Galilee in northern Israel, where Jesus carries out most of his ministry. The Roman Empire is the world power, and they control and occupy all of Israel. Roman officers are stationed throughout the country, including this centurion, a commander of roughly one hundred men. He is important, a man in power and control. And he did not get to this point without understanding how authority works.

He has a servant who is sick, at the point of death. The centurion has heard about Jesus, who was going around healing and blessing and speaking as a man of God. And, as it works out, Jesus is right there in Capernaum. So the centurion sends some messengers to Jesus, to bring him the request to heal his servant.

But why doesn’t the centurion just go himself? Why does he relay his words through messengers? The messengers are elders of the Jews, leaders of the local synagogue. The man making the request is a Gentile. It seems the centurion is respecting Jesus’ Jewishness, and not forcing him to deal directly and publicly with a Gentile, whom many Jews considered unclean and inferior. So he sends Jewish elders in his place.

And they plead the centurion’s case: **“He is worthy of having you do this for him, because he loves our nation, and he built our synagogue for us.”** It seems these Jewish elders do not have their theology quite straight. We do not come to God with our requests because we are worthy. If we did, we could not come to him at all. In Catechism class you learned under the Fifth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our sins...we are worthy of none of things for which we ask, neither have we deserved them, but we ask that

he would give them all to us by grace, for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment.” This is true. God does not answer our prayers because we are worthy. He listens because he is gracious.

A better way to understand the fact that this centurion loved the Jewish nation and built a synagogue in his town is that these acts were not an attempt to make himself worthy, but the natural fruits of his faith in the true God. The Roman centurion had come in contact with the Jewish religion, and thus with the Word of God. That Word created faith in his heart. And then these good works – love for the Jewish people, building a synagogue – were the divine results of his budding faith.

This phenomenon of Gentiles respecting, honoring, and believing the Jewish religion was not unheard of. We encounter several of these Gentiles in the New Testament. They are called “God-fearers.” They were drawn to the religion of Israel because it was superior to the pagan religions of their world. The laws shone with moral superiority next to pagan depravity and decadence. Israel’s God was superior to the pagan gods, with all their fickleness and human qualities imposed on them by their human inventors. Basically, it was the divine truth of Israel’s religion drew them to it and brought them to faith in it.

Regardless of what the Jewish elders say about the centurion’s worthiness, Jesus decides to go with them to the centurion’s house. Before they even get to the house, though, the centurion sends some friends out to meet them. These friends, too, have a message to deliver to Jesus, again from the centurion. It begins, **“Lord, do not trouble yourself, because I do not deserve to have you come under my roof.”** What a contrast to, **“He is worthy..”**! The centurion says about himself, “I am not worthy.” This is real humility. And God gives grace to the humble. As powerful as he is in his worldly realm, the centurion recognizes his unworthiness before God.

“Lord, do not trouble yourself, because I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed.” May we all have the same humble approach as the centurion!

And may we also recognize the authority of Jesus, and his compassion to give the mercy we seek from him. He has the authority and compassion to heal souls by forgiving sins. He has the authority to forgive because he himself came into this world to win our pardon and peace. He humbled himself and walked on dusty ground in a world broken by sin, but sin never touched him, until he took all the sin of the whole world onto his shoulders on the cross. On Easter he proved with his resurrection that our sins were paid for in full.

Jesus has the authority to heal souls with forgiveness. He also has the mercy. It was mercy that moved him from his Father’s side to come and save us. His heart wants nothing more than for sinners to turn to him for healing. Jesus has the authority and mercy to heal – to heal our souls from sin. So we come to him humbly for healing, just like the centurion. And we come confidently: “Jesus, just say the word.”

When Christ speaks words of healing, they have authority. The centurion thoroughly understands this. He draws on his military experience and the authority of his own word as an officer: **“For I am also a man placed under authority, having soldiers under me. I say to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goes; and to another one, ‘Come!’ and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”** This is the marvelous insight that the centurion gets about Jesus! He recognizes that Jesus comes from God with authority to make things happen. His word carries healing, life-giving power. That is the basis for his appeal and confidence that Jesus can heal with just a word: **“But say the word, and my servant will be healed.”**

There are very few instances in the Gospels where Jesus marvels, or is astonished or amazed. One is a negative instance, when Jesus is astonished at the lack of faith in his own hometown of Nazareth. And there is another example of Jesus commending great faith. It's the faith of another Gentile, a Canaanite woman who persists in her requests for healing even Jesus tests her faith firmly.

So, the centurion's faith is exemplary. We approach the Lord in humility, as empty-handed beggars. We claim no merit of our own. But we do approach in faith, knowing that the Lord is gracious and merciful. We come confidently, knowing what Jesus has done for us, knowing that his word has authority to do what he says.

Jesus' word to the centurion had authority, even when delivered by messengers. It seems the centurion never did meet Jesus face-to-face. Only through messengers. But Jesus' words maintained their full power, even when relayed through others. Jesus still works through messengers. Jesus still tells his messengers, **"Whoever listens to you, listens to me."** When your pastor stands in front of you and forgives your sins in Jesus' name, you can, as the Catechism says, "know this is just as valid and certain in heaven as if Christ dealt with us himself." When you hold family devotions and speak Christ's forgiveness in your homes, you are his messengers there. And his word still has authority. It heals. When your pastor proclaims life and salvation in Jesus' name, it is Jesus' own sermon to you. And when he consecrates Communion with Jesus' words, you can know Jesus' words do what Jesus says.

Friends, Jesus loves you as much as he loved that centurion and his servant. Take to heart what Jesus does for you, here, today. He is speaking life-giving words to you today.

His word had authority to heal the servant's body. It has authority to heal you, too. Marvel at what Jesus does for you here today, by means of his word: he is giving you forgiveness, life, and salvation. He is healing your body and soul for eternity. His word, backed by his saving work, accomplishes it. It is simply marvelous. Amen.