

The Second Sunday after Pentecost • May 29, 2016

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Luke 7:1-10

“Trusted Authority”

The centurion had it right.

This man understood his place in the world. He was a career soldier. He had a hundred men under his command. His position balanced in the tension between authority and responsibility: he was accountable to the commander of the legion to which his troops belonged, handling the discipline and administration of all his soldiers. He was well-paid, able to support and care for his family and household workers. Centurions had good standing in Roman society, too, so people looked up to him. He even got along well with the locals. He loved the people of Capernaum, even building a place, a synagogue, for them to gather for teaching and worship life.

When the centurion's slave became gravely ill, he knew that, for all his power and authority, he could do nothing to heal the man. And because this slave was a valued member of his household – back in those days, slaves were generally not mistreated, and this one in particular was important to the centurion – he sought help from someone who would have the power to deliver what's needed. He'd heard about the Jewish rabbi who was doing amazing things, healing people wherever he went. Understanding Jewish culture, he sent some of the town's leaders, people who regarded him as a trusted authority and friend, to go and ask this Jesus for help.

The centurion knew that his identity as a Gentile might keep a rabbi from coming to his home out of concern for becoming unclean. Going to Jesus, the elders of the people pleaded for Jesus to come and heal the slave, telling the rabbi that this Roman was worthy to have Jesus take action. As Jesus came near to the house, though, the centurion sent more friends to keep Jesus from coming in, admitting that he wasn't worthy of Jesus entering in. As a man who held a position under authority himself, the soldier understood how it worked. He trusted that Jesus' authoritative word of command would be effective. He had it right.

Despite what the Jewish elders said about the centurion, he wasn't worthy to have Jesus enter in to his house. It's not that they were wrong about him, though: the centurion probably worshiped God along with the people of Israel. He obviously cared for his slave as more than just part of his property. He may have been a legitimately good guy. And yet he still knew that he was unworthy to have God's holy one come to him. And neither are you.

What makes you worthy? Going through life, you'll be told that all kinds of marks can show that you're someone others should trust. You've probably learned that certain measurements can let people see just how worthy you are: your grades or your victories, your follower count or your likes, your paycheck and your rank. If you have all that, then in the eyes of the world, you're worthy of respect, even worthy of having others serve you. And if you just listen to what the world has to say, you might even start thinking that you've earned it all, that you're entitled to their service. But what happens when you're not worthy enough?

As our nation observes Memorial Day this year, remembering those who gave their lives in the service of the country's armed forces, a good part of America's attention is going to the race to see who will become our next Commander-in-Chief. If you asked the candidates if they were worthy of holding this highest office in our land, I don't know how they'd respond. Nevertheless, regardless of what your opinion might be of those running for the presidency, the simple fact is that none of them is worthy. None of us is. That's something that the Roman centurion understood. No one is entitled to the office of the President and the authority that goes with it. As was the case of the centurion, it's a position *under* authority: in our case, under the authority of the people of the United States. Soldiers serve – and have given their lives – trusting in the authority of the Commander-in-Chief without having to pledge themselves to the person who holds the office. Because who would be worthy of such service?

The centurion had it right. He knew that he wasn't worthy of having Jesus enter into his house. Yet he also trusted in the power of authority. Not only did he hope that Jesus would deliver his valued servant from death, he trusted in the power of Jesus' word. He understood that Jesus need only speak a word, and his servant *must be* healed. The centurion trusted that the bearer of God's supernatural power could command the slave to be restored to health, by the authority of his word.

What authority do you trust? Where can you go when circumstances turn for the worse, and you find that it's beyond your ability to make them better? In this day and age, there's a lot of skepticism towards authority. That's fair. How can you trust in institutions or in people who have failed in the past and could very well fail again? Even you and I have failed at some point. Therefore, we need to look to someone who hasn't failed. Someone who won't fail. And that's the one who was amazed at the centurion's faith.

The centurion understood his place in the world; what's more, he had an idea of who Jesus was. In fact, it's somewhat ironic that this Gentile soldier probably had a better idea of who Jesus was than the Jewish elders who he sent when asking for help. However, you and I have an even better idea who Jesus is, because we have heard the word that the centurion asked Jesus to speak for his servant. It's the word of authority that brings healing and forgiveness, even to unworthy people like us. It's the word of authority that said from the cross, "It is finished." It's the word of authority that declares from the waters of the baptismal font, "You are my beloved child." It's the word of authority that invites you to the table and says, "Take, eat, this is my body," and "Take, drink, this is my blood." It's the word of authority that on the Last Day will command, "Arise," and death will be done forever.

What makes you worthy? God's love in Jesus. Faith, the faith that comes from God, the faith which trusts in Jesus, that's what brings salvation into our households. Faith understands that we are not worthy of the great gifts that God gives, including whatever authority has been given into our care. Yet faith also marvels and celebrates that Jesus – who has ultimate authority – doesn't just come into our homes but delights to dwell with us.

On this long holiday weekend and in the shortened workweek ahead, take some time to consider where you put your trust. Think about why you trust those things. Appreciate and enjoy what you've been given and reflect on why it is that you can do so. And when you do, remember the Roman soldier who sought out the one who had the power to deliver what was needed. May we, like the centurion, confess our unworthiness and trust in Jesus' authority. For when he speaks, we, too, must be healed.

Amen.