

Just Say the Word

After Jesus finished presenting all his words among the people, he entered Capernaum. ² A centurion had a servant who was very important to him, but the servant was ill and about to die. ³ When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to Jesus to ask him to come and heal (*diasozo*-to save thoroughly) his servant. ⁴ When they came to Jesus, they earnestly pleaded with Jesus. “He deserves to have you do this for him,” they said. ⁵ “He loves our people and he built our synagogue for us.” ⁶ 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. ⁷ In fact, I didn’t even consider myself worthy to come to you. Just say the word and my servant will be healed. ⁸ 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.” ⁹ 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.” ¹⁰ When the centurion’s friends returned to his house, they found the servant restored to health.

Luke 7:1-10

One of the unique challenges of connecting this Biblical passage with contemporary life is the reality of first century, institutionalized slavery. I am going to weave a metaphor that connects contemporary life with the story, but let me make this disclaimer: The relationship between a boss and an employee is not like the relationship between a slave and a slave-owner. Treating human beings as if they were property is never just, and systems that perpetuate such values have no place in God’s world.

Imagine for a moment that you wake up one morning with a blistering fever. By the afternoon, you feel like death warmed over. Suddenly, there’s a knock on your bedroom door. It’s your boss from work. He heard about your illness and dropped everything to visit you. He assures you that you can have all the sick paid leave that you need. He even upgraded your health insurance before he left the office. Not only that, he called in a favor on your behalf to a friend who sits on the Board of Trustees at Baptist Hospital. Until you are healthy, no, in the best health of your life, you will have the highest quality medical care available. If this sounds exceedingly generous and unbelievably compassionate to you, imagine how it seemed to the sick slave of the Roman Centurion.

The beginning of our story today says that the deathly ill servant was “very important” to the Centurion. Other translations say the slave was “valued highly”. The cynic among us will say that the Centurion’s care was motivated purely by business reasons; the slave was valuable, financially speaking, lost labor was lost income. Besides, the cynic would argue, how compassionate can a Roman military leader be?

Yet the Centurion’s actions seem to stretch well beyond cold economic prudence. He drops everything that he is doing to sit by the bedside of the one in his care. He arranges medical treatment at great cost to himself. He does not leave the side of his servant; rather, he sends colleagues and friends out to run his errands. He is like a boss who genuinely cares. And the words that the Centurion entrusts to his Jewish colleagues are these: “Ask Jesus to come and heal my servant”. In fact, the Centurion doesn’t say “heal”; the Greek word recorded by Luke is *diasozo*. It means “thoroughly save”.

We talked about Salvation at the Parents of Young Children meeting, or POYC, last week. The time reminded me of sitting in a room full of puppies. The enthusiasm, energy, and playfulness was both fun and a little disorienting. We started talking about Salvation, but we quickly hopped on an Ethical tangent. From there, we ran head long into Theodicy, before making a u turn near the

intersection of Justice and Judgment. We paused briefly at Atonement before making a giant leap back to Salvation. I told the group that it was like trying to cover an entire year of Theology and Ethics in a single afternoon.

One of the things that I took away from the conversation, something that is applicable to this text, is that Salvation is contextual. Salvation is different depending on the circumstances of the one crying out to be saved. For the Centurion's servant, salvation meant being healed from sickness. For a man burdened by financial debt, salvation is a clean ledger. For a woman weighed down with guilt, salvation is forgiveness (7:50). For a young ruler isolated by greed, salvation is the gift of a generous spirit (18:26) Salvation is many things, freedom from oppression, the restoration of a relationship, the promise of life beyond death. Let me borrow from the Baptists for a moment and ask, when were you saved?

We return then to the words of the Centurion, "Ask Jesus to come and thoroughly save my servant". What amazes me is that the centurion does not simply request that his servant be healed (*sozo*) but that the servant be "thoroughly healed" (*diasozo*). These are not the words of a profit focused lieutenant. These are the words of a concerned and compassionate caregiver.

The next question to ponder is how does a Roman soldier know the local Jewish elders? It is likely that the centurion was a God-fearer. This was an actual group of people within a local Jewish synagogue, non-Jewish people who participated in the worshipping life of the congregation but did not official convert to the faith. We might call them "friends of the church". In a Roman culture where dozens of gods were worshipped, God-fearers were attracted to Judaism's worship of one God and the moral code that they lived by.

The text also shares with us that the centurion was responsible for building the local synagogue. This practice was common in the Roman Empire. In a world where there were no State funded, government operated social safety nets or welfare programs, citizens turned to local social clubs and religious establishments for support. It was common for synagogues (and later churches) to be supported by wealthy, local patrons. Patronage was a system based on an unwritten code of mutuality and honor. When the Jewish elders approached Jesus and made the centurion's request with an appeal to the centurion's worthiness, they were simply exercising the honor that they owed to their patron.

Remarkably, the Centurion sends friends to disavow him of the honor. In this story, we see a slave-owning, military leader became a compassionate caregiver. We witness the wealthy, honorable patron present himself as the humble, unworthy servant. It is exactly the type of reversal that we would expect to encounter in the Gospel of Luke. Luke's gospel is all about the inversion of power. The song Mary sings in the first chapter sets the tone for Luke's book:

God has pulled the powerful down from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly.

God has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty-handed.

This is important to remember when we hear Jesus say, "I tell you, even in Israel I haven't found faith like this." Faith like what? Faith that is compassionate; faith that is humble. Also, a faith that understands authority. And this is where we need to be careful. My tendency is to read the centurion's reflection on authority, "I say go and he goes, come and he comes, do this and he does it", as a statement of absolute power. This kind of power and authority is a one way street, controlling power that rains down from on high. It is "do it because I said so" kind of power. But remember, this is Luke, our expectations are constantly challenged and flipped upside down. The centurion knows and

Jesus affirms that true authority is never coercive or controlling, but is rooted in trust. Authentic authority is a two way street. It is not taken, but received. And it can only be sustained where there is genuine mutuality and trust. The centurion was able to exercise authority because he was compassionate toward the people in his care, and because he entrusted himself to the local community in humility and respect. Knowing the true nature of authority, the centurion placed his trust in Jesus.

The church elders are preparing to review the Session Manual this week. Jim Moore stopped by the office the other day and lamented the task, “I don’t like rules and regulations,” he said. Neither do I, Jim! The hair on my neck bristles when I am expected to submit to structures of authority. My first instinct when I encounter hierarchy is to do the opposite of what I am told.

But what if we approached the Session Manual with the faith of the centurion? By examining how we structure our life together, we trust the wisdom of the leaders who have come before us. By reviewing our corporate identity, we entrust ourselves to welfare of this congregation, and to one another. We are a fellowship rooted in trust.

Children of God, this is the Good News:

When you entrust your life to Jesus and a community of faithful disciples,

Just say the word and someone will be there for you, to sit by your bed when you’re sick, to share tears in a time of crisis.

Just say the word, and a warm meal will arrive when you’re hungry and tired.

Just say the word and a friend will meet you in your loneliest moment.

Just say the word, and I promise no distance on heaven or earth will keep you from the compassionate love of God in Christ Jesus.

Just say the word.