

# Giving the Order

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
May 29, 2016

- Luke 7:1-10 Taken aback, Jesus addressed the accompanying crowd: "I've yet to come across this kind of simple trust anywhere in Israel...." (The Message translation)
- Psalms 96
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: The enduring word of Jesus is as powerful as the presence of Jesus.

Let's consider this story — one that I don't believe I've ever preached on before — let's consider this story by taking it apart, sort of verse-by-verse....

**1-5 "When he finished speaking to the people..."**

- Was this a particularly memorable time Jesus had been speaking? You're familiar with the Sermon on the Mount that Matthew presents in Chapters 5, 6 and 7? Luke's gospel presents similar material in what is often called the Sermon on the Plain: 6:17 "When Jesus had come down from the hill with the apostles, he stood on a level place with a large number of his disciples. A large crowd of people was there from all over Judea and from Jerusalem and the coast cities of Tyre and Sidon."
- This episode with Jesus occurs after the Sermon on the Plain, when, as the verse says,

**"...he entered Capernaum."**

- It was a fishing village on northern shore of Sea of Galilee.
- The disciples Peter, Andrew, James and John were from there.
- It had also become a sort of home-away-from-home for Jesus when he was in the region of the Sea of Galilee but was too far from Nazareth.

**"A Roman captain there had a servant who was on his deathbed. He prized him highly and didn't want to lose him."**

- Bibles often refer to a "captain" by its Latin name, "centurion." Centurions or captains were the "backbone of Roman army. Each legion was made up of sixty centuries, each commanded by a centurion. He was a veteran soldier and had a position of [authority and] prestige — he was paid about fifteen times as much as an ordinary soldier...."<sup>1</sup>
- Such captains or centurions were also the agent of the Roman empire, so they served as the broker of imperial resources — "the guy to know" to get things done.
- Note that the captain "prized" his servant; he was no heartless soldier.

**"When he heard Jesus was back..."**

Whether new at his post or a long-timer, this captain knew that Jesus frequented Capernaum.

**"...he sent leaders from the Jewish community asking him to come and heal his servant. They came to Jesus and urged him to do it, saying, 'He deserves this. He loves our people. He even built our meeting place.'"**

- Why would a Roman send leaders of the local Jewish community? To improve his chances for gaining a favor?

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Malina & Richard L. Rohrbaugh, Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, 326 (caption)

- The Jewish leaders advocated on the captain's behalf: "this representative of the imperial power that's occupying our land is actually good to us. He appropriated Caesar's funds to build us a new synagogue."

**6-8 Jesus went with them. When he was still quite far from the house, the captain sent friends to tell him, "Master, you don't have to go to all this trouble."**

- Again, this wasn't the captain talking directly to Jesus. This time, though, the captain sent friends... not people who had to do what the captain ordered, but friends who would want to do whatever was best for him. Since they knew how upset the captain was by his servant's illness, you'd think they'd actually tell Jesus, "He *says* he doesn't want to trouble you... but please, he really needs you. His servant dying is tearing him up." But that's not what they said. They were true to what the captain asked them to say to Jesus on his behalf, which was...

**"I'm not that good a person, you know. I'd be embarrassed for you to come to my house, even embarrassed to come to you in person."**

- That's obvious. First the captain sent leaders of the Jewish community and then he sent his own best friends as intermediaries between himself and Jesus.
- It's refreshing that this powerful, commanding person is still in touch with a sincere sense of humility.
- The friends continue to relay the captain's sentiments...

**Just give the order and my servant will get well. I'm a man under orders; I also give orders. I tell one soldier, 'Go,' and he goes; another, 'Come,' and he comes; my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it."**

- Do you have any movies that, if you're channel surfing and you come across a certain movie, you'll stop and watch the rest of it 'til the end? One for me is a military courtroom drama starring Tom Cruise, Demi Moore, Kevin Bacon and Jack Nicholson called "A Few Good Men." The plot revolves around a soldier's duty to follow orders. At one point Nicholson's character, the seasoned commander of the Guantanamo Bay Naval Station named Col. Jessep, responds to questioning from Cruise's character, a young, impertinent Navy attorney named Lt. Kaffee. Col. Jessep instructs Lt. Kaffee, "We follow orders, son. We follow orders or people die. It's that simple. Are we clear?"<sup>2</sup>
- The Roman captain is clear: he understands that one with authority needs simply to give an order, and it will be carried out. The captain views Jesus as just such a person – if he will simply pronounce the desire for the servant to be healed, the power of the divine will assure that it's carried out.
- Now here comes the climax of the story...

**9-10 Taken aback, Jesus addressed the accompanying crowd: "I've yet to come across this kind of simple trust anywhere in Israel, the very people who are supposed to know about God and how he works." When the messengers got back home, they found the servant up and well.**

- "Taken aback"? "Taken aback???" Can you *imagine* what it would take for Jesus to be surprised, astounded, floored by anything or anyone? But realize this:
- in this whole episode...
  - through this whole exchange of an army guy asking Jesus to come and heal...
  - Jesus consenting to come...

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<sup>2</sup> <http://genius.com/Aaron-sorkin-a-few-good-men-you-cant-handle-the-truth-annotated>, accessed 5/25/2016

- the powerful, influential, authoritative centurion deciding that he himself wasn't worthy of asking for the time and effort of this impoverished, itinerant teacher and preacher and healer...
  - the captain stating boldly that he absolutely trusts that Jesus can simply order illness to vacate the premises and the captain's servant will be healed...
  - throughout this whole exchange, Jesus and the captain never see each other. They never meet face-to-face.
- So why was Jesus "taken aback"? Because according to Jesus, not even from his fellow Jews (who supposedly had an "inside track" to knowing the ways of God) did he ever see such confident faith as this non-Jewish Roman officer displayed. The centurion knew with confidence and certainty that the word of Jesus was as powerful as the presence of Jesus. The captain knew that the power of Jesus to touch and change a life did not depend on his being physically present. To the captain it didn't make any difference that he and Jesus were separated. It didn't make a difference that they were separated by distance, and social standing, and economic clout, and governmental authority, and the exercise of might.

And that's the lesson we can take from this episode of the non-meeting between Jesus and the Roman captain. They were separated by a matter of a few hundred yards, perhaps. We are separated from the presence of the traveling rabbi of Nazareth not only by oceans and continents, but also the span of twenty centuries.

Still, we are no more disadvantaged by that separation than were the centurion and his slave. The word of Jesus remains effective and present to us because of our faith. The word of Jesus maintains its authority and power. It shapes and molds us, it inspires and empowers us, it comforts and heals us. The word of Jesus lives wherever the church is gathered for worship and wherever it is sent out to serve. The church lives because the word of Jesus lives in us. If the word of Jesus had power only in ancient Palestine, the church would have "a past but no present, [the church would find] small comfort in a Book of fond memories of what Jesus once said and what he once did."<sup>3</sup>

The captain of the Roman guard stationed in Capernaum had faith—a faith that anticipated the kind of faith we need today. Presbyterian preacher and author Frederick Buechner described the power of that depth of faith when he explained

Believing in him is not the same as believing things about him such as that he was born of a virgin and raised Lazarus from the dead. Instead, it is a matter of giving our hearts to him, of come hell or high water putting our money on him, the way a child believes in a mother or a father, the way a mother or a father believes in a child.<sup>4</sup>

Paraphrasing a Motown standard we can affirm that "There ain't no mountain high enough, ain't no valley low enough, ain't no river wide enough"<sup>5</sup> to keep the power of the word of Jesus from shaping and guiding our lives, even way over here and all these years later.

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<sup>3</sup> Fred B. Craddock, Luke: Interpretation—a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1990, 95

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Buechner, cited in William MacRae's The Miracle in You. Bloomington, Indiana: AuthorHouse, 2012, 37.

<sup>5</sup> "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" by Nickolas Ashford & Valerie Simpson, 1966, lyrics accessed 5/25/2016 at [http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/m/marvin\\_gaye/aint\\_no\\_mountain\\_high\\_enough.html](http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/m/marvin_gaye/aint_no_mountain_high_enough.html)