

May 29, 2016 – Memorial Day Weekend  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Luke 7:1-10

### **Healing for the Centurion**

Memorial Day weekend: the unofficial start to summer—and what a marvelously summery week it has been. The warmth, the sunlight, the green and growing things all make you want to join in with the psalmist: “Sing to the Lord all the earth!” Even the thunderstorms make me think of the psalm: “holy splendor and trembling earth.” The claps of thunder and flashes of lightening like exclamation points: “Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised!” Summer can make me feel like that—as can a Monday holiday: no work, no school: “Great is the Lord!”

Here in church we mark the change in season with a change in colors, a change in worship time, and with changes in the worship service itself. We have a different musical setting, and we begin the service with confession and forgiveness. We also have a change in the gospel. Beginning this Sunday and continuing throughout the entire summer the gospel readings all come from Luke, all come from the middle of the gospel of Luke. In the winter and spring—in the seasons of Christmas and Easter—we were hearing from the beginning or late parts of Luke or from John, stories of Jesus’ birth, and then of his death and resurrection. But today and throughout the summer we will be hearing of the time in between that, we’ll be hearing of Jesus’s earthly ministry, of all the marvelous ways he offered healing, and to whom. In the green and growing months of summer we hear how Jesus’ ministry grew. We’ll hear how he traveled about—just as many of us will travel about this summer—we’ll hear how on his travels, and closer to home, Jesus encountered people who were foreigners, strangers, people who were different, who were not particularly liked. Jesus’ healing was for them, too.

Today’s gospel is a prime example of this. Its main character, other than Jesus, is a soldier—a perhaps fitting coincidence, on Memorial Day weekend—but he’s not simply a soldier, he’s a soldier with authority, a commander of soldiers. A centurion was so called because he was in charge of a century, that is, of one hundred, soldiers, one hundred Roman soldiers. Rome, remember, was the enemy. Rome was in the process of expanding its empire, having moved in and taken command of the land where Jesus lived, and Rome affirmed and flaunted its power by stationing its armies amongst the people it had conquered. Rome was an occupying power that had taken over the holy land—but Rome was not holy. Rome did not observe Jewish religious law. In fact, it was against Roman law for a Roman citizen to do so.

For all these reasons, it’s remarkable that a Roman centurion would seek help from Jesus, an itinerant Jewish healer, but he does. This centurion has someone in his household who is very sick, and so he sends people to appeal to Jesus on his behalf. The people the centurion sends say to Jesus, “He’s a good guy, this centurion, help him.” And so Jesus goes to the centurion’s house. But before Jesus even gets there, he is met by yet others who make a further appeal on the centurion’s behalf, this time with a message directly from the centurion. The centurion says that he knows about authority: when he gives orders, others follow. So, also, Jesus does not even need to come into the centurion’s house. “Speak the word,” the centurion’s message says, “and let my servant be healed.” And the servant is. Jesus doesn’t even have to go to the house, and those who return there find that the man who was sick is now in good health. A gospel story with a foreigner, an outsider, a stranger—and a marvelous healing.

But it’s also more complicated than that.

First off, there's that first appeal, and the people who make it on behalf of the centurion, and why. That first appeal is made by the Jewish leaders of the town. This is intriguing in various ways. First, that Jewish leaders would speak favorably of someone who represents, who works for, and who no doubt benefits from, their oppressor, Rome. It's of further interest that the Jewish leaders, who in the gospels are often at odds with Jesus, are here appealing to Jesus for help. But perhaps the reason that they give as they make the appeal is the most intriguing. The Jewish leaders say that Jesus should do this healing, because the centurion is a good guy: "He is worthy of having you do this, for he loves our people." A moving tribute—and then there is this: "He's the one who built our synagogue," which makes me pause. The centurion did something for them, gave them something, built them something. Is that what makes a person worthy? Or, is that what makes people appeal on their behalf?

But even before we get to that, from the very outset, there's yet another, yet more troubling element that complicates this story. The centurion is seeking healing, but not for himself. That would seem like a good thing, right? The centurion is not seeking healing for himself, but for someone else—but that someone else he wants to help is his slave. Much is made of how much the centurion values his slave, but still, the word is slave. Is the slave highly valued as a person—or as personal property? Does the centurion love the slave, or love the way he himself benefits from slavery? Is what the centurion does laudable, or deplorable? Is the centurion a benevolent slave owner? Is there such a thing?

But maybe it was it different back then... But what about today? Are we different today? We too have people in authority, people with complicated positions, people who are lauded and deplored: governors, leaders of military institutions, heads of the TSA...

We too have people in authority; we too are people in authority. Now I cannot say, as the centurion does, that when I say "Go," people go, or that when I say "Come," people come. I cannot say that my dog does that. But I can say, I do know, that I benefit from oppressive systems, including the legacy of slavery in this very country, including the military might of this country throughout the world, including comforts and conveniences that I daily take for granted. I may think that it is ridiculous to have to wait for three hours at an airport check-in line, but what about people who have been waiting for months, for years, to enter and live in a country where they can be safe?

The centurion is not simply a good guy, nor is he simply the emblem of an evil empire. He is someone who is caught up in the complicated structures of political force and human relationships. He is someone who is caught up in the strings that trail behind generosity, and the net of desperation of illness near to death. He is a stranger, an outsider, he is someone we might not like, someone to censure, and he is us.

To him, and to us, Jesus offers something marvelous: healing. Healing for all that ails us: our abuse of authority, our misplaced values, our inability to love our enemies.

With the centurion, with the words we speak in confession, at the beginning of our worship service, we can recognize our inadequacy. "Lord, I am not worthy." With the centurion, with the words spoken at many masses, at many Roman Catholic masses just before communion, we too can say, "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed." With the centurion, we too may receive praise. We have it on good authority, on the ultimate authority, God's grace is for people just like us—and there is no distance too great for God's marvelous power.