

Luke 7: 1-10
June 2, 2013
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

In the passage just before this one Jesus raises the issue of obedience to his authority. “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and do not do what I tell you?” He then goes on to give a teaching that the one who lives a life of free and loving response to Jesus is building life on a foundation that cannot be shaken. While the one whose life is built on the shifting sands of earthly life is heading for a fall.

It is interesting that immediately following this teaching comes the encounter with a Roman army officer. The officer is wealthy and generous. He deserves Jesus’ attention because, although a gentile, he has contributed the funds to build a synagogue. He is therefore “worthy” to receive Jesus’ attending to his slave who is sick to the point of death.

Yet when the centurion discovers that Jesus is on his way he sends servants to plead with him not to come. Why? Because in the centurion’s self estimation he is *unworthy* that Jesus should come to his house. We are meant to notice the stark contrast between the way the leaders of the religious community view this man and his own attitude toward himself.

In this the waning of the great era of self esteem, we may recoil from the centurion’s self abasement. It may seem like groveling. Yet the culture of Jesus’ time had no concept of self esteem. Especially in the culture of Roman society every person had a place in the order of society. One was respected and obeyed in relation to one’s position. While there was some movement within the social structure there was not

much. Ambition beyond one's station was not encouraged. Indeed to be called "ambitious" was severe criticism.

The social, military and political stability depended on this acceptance of one's place both in relation to those above one in rank or class and below one. Everybody was in authority over someone—except the emperor and a slave. And therefore it was understood that the person who was best able to be *in authority* was someone who was able to be *under authority*.

I want to pause here to focus on this understanding. To be in authority is— theoretically anyway— to be able to direct the actions of those under you. To be under authority is to be obligated to respond to the direction to the person *in* authority. It seems pretty straightforward. And yet as anyone who has been either in authority or under authority knows the honoring of direction is not automatic. There is a sense in which our authority derives from the consent of those over whom we are in charge. We must earn the respect of those we would direct. All the studies of what makes a good leader emphasize the ability to see *people* not objects of manipulation; the ability to listen more than give orders; to be fair in treatment of all; and above all to be a human being, not someone who hides behind a role. Oh, and it helps to know something—the jobs being performed and the overall objectives of the organization.

Authority is not the arbitrary exercise of power. It is not the expression of the need to dominate those who are weaker. In Jesus' teaching the one most able to lead understands herself as the servant. Ultimate the highest quality of a leader is the willingness to lay down his life for those serves.

That is why Jesus is so moved by the attitude of the centurion:

Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only say the word and let my servant be healed. For I *also* am a man set *under* authority, with soldiers *under* me; and I say to one, 'Go' and he goes, and to another 'Come' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this' and he does it.

You see here the interplay of being *in* and *under* authority which is marked by respect and trust. In contrast to his sometimes unruly disciples, this Roman soldier understands authority and obedience. He further recognizes Jesus as someone who is in authority over *him*. No wonder Jesus exclaims, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith!"

I emphasize this aspect of the story because it brings light to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper which we will soon celebrate. Jesus was and is the messiah. From the earliest Christians to today we confess "Jesus is Lord!" By that we mean that we are under his spiritual authority. When he says "Go" we are meant to go. "When he says "Come" we are meant to come. When he says "Do this" we are meant to do it. Yet we are far more like the disciples Jesus chides. We are erratic in our obedience.

And yet Jesus recognized an authority higher than his own, his heavenly father who called him to lay down his life for all people in all times and places. He did not want to give up his human life but out of free and loving obedience to God and unconditional love he suffered and died. The bread and the cup which we are about to share is more than a reminder of Jesus' obedience. The bread and the cup represent his claim on our lives to be our Lord and the one whose authority we seek to make first priority in every aspect of our lives. Amen.

