

Pentecost 2C (5/29/2016)

1 Kings 8:22-23, 41-43

Psalm 96:1-9

Galatians 1:1-12

Luke 7:1-10

Every person is a world. We are quick to assign people to categories by which we may judge them, but Jesus has a way of complicating our categories, especially with regard to the worthiness or faithfulness of those we would normally condemn. In this way, God blurs our boundaries, and preserves the hope that the world may yet be healed.

By coincidence, our Gospel for today, Sunday of Memorial Day weekend, features a soldier. It's the story of a compassionate soldier, a well-respected soldier who demonstrates exemplary faith in Jesus. Initially, we might be inclined to celebrate the centurion as an archetype of honorable military service, a pillar of the community in which he serves, and a model disciple. Such a reading would resonate well with Memorial Day celebrations nationwide.

But, as you might suspect, it would be misguided. As it turns out, Jesus lifts up the centurion's faithfulness *in spite of* his military identity, not because of it. Recall that a centurion did not, in fact, represent the community where he was stationed. Rather, he served at the behest of Rome, an empire that sprawled across the ancient world. The Roman centurion commanded 100 soldiers who, alongside legions of others, were tasked with one thing: to subject local people in every corner of the Mediterranean world to the will of the empire. So, the centurion was no heroic defender of the community, but an

unwelcome occupier. His was the face of a foreign oppressor, like a commander of storm troopers on the planet Endor, or a high-ranking Nazi officer in war-torn France.

And, there is no mistaking that Rome's presence was a scourge for the people in and around ancient Palestine. The empire levied heavy taxes on top of the already burdensome tribute demanded by local puppet kings. Taxation not only funded the opulent lifestyles of elites in the capital city, but also supported the very military occupation under which local people suffered.¹ In other words, Rome forced the Jewish community to subsidize its own subjugation.

What's more, Rome was merciless in its suppression of local resistance. Around the time of Jesus' birth, for instance, the Roman commander, Varus, burned the city of Sepphoris, only a few miles from Nazareth, in retaliation for disobedience. Varus also destroyed the hill town of Emmaus, the setting of a famous resurrection story in the Gospel of Luke. In total, Roman soldiers killed or enslaved tens of thousands of Galilean and Judean people in Jesus' time, causing significant trauma for the communities to which he was sent.²

So, the centurion, a slave owner himself, is an unlikely protagonist. As we learn from his Jewish neighbors in Capernaum, however, he cannot be defined solely by his allegiance to Rome or his military role or his exploitation

¹ Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 25. See also 19, 22, 30.

² *Ibid.* 30.

of slaves. According to a delegation of Jewish locals whom he sends to Jesus on his behalf, the centurion loves the people of Capernaum, and has even funded the construction of their synagogue. He respects Jewish custom enough to avoid coming into direct contact with Jesus, thereby preserving Jesus' ritual purity. And, he seems genuinely concerned for the well-being of his sick slave.

Although Luke's audience has every reason to hate the centurion, the story in today's Gospel complicates his portrait, lifting up the complexity of his identity, character, and connection to the people. And ultimately, the centurion's defining characteristic is his *faith*. Even as he possesses significant authority himself, **he recognizes Jesus' superior authority - an authority Jesus exercises not to conquer and control, but to heal and give life. In other words, the centurion perceives that Jesus takes his marching orders from a higher power with a higher purpose.** "Only speak the word, and let my slave be healed," the centurion pleads. Amazed, Jesus responds to his crowd of followers, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."

The Roman centurion exemplifies the notion that **every person is a world**. No single aspect of his personhood completely defines him; his life is a web of traits and roles and relationships, the complexity of which is hidden to most. Yet, we are quick to assign people to categories by which we may judge them. Invader, oppressor, slave driver - these seem like sufficiently damning identifiers for the centurion. But **Jesus has a way of complicating our**

categories, especially with regard to the worthiness or faithfulness of those we would normally condemn. In spite of his shadow side, the centurion is worthy to call upon Jesus on behalf of one of “the least of these.” His appeal is sincere and efficacious.

The centurion’s faithfulness calls into question our tendency to reject others on account of our preconceptions. Who is your centurion? Who are you inclined to condemn outright? Is he a militant extremist? A greedy financial executive? A deadbeat parent? A hotheaded candidate for political office?

But, every person is a world. What you see is only part of the story. **The wonder of grace is that God embraces each of us in our complexity; God loves us even in spite of what is unlovable. And, to the degree that we accept God’s gift of mercy for ourselves, we become merciful to others. As soon as we recognize another person’s complexity – as soon as we know him more deeply than our categories would allow – we begin to see him through Jesus’ eyes, the way Jesus sees the centurion.**

And in this way, God blurs our boundaries, making a way for understanding where we see only barriers. In this way, God affirms that no one is out of the reach of grace, and preserves the hope that the world may yet be healed.