

True Faith  
Matthew 8:5-13

Who has legitimate authority? We've been thinking a lot about that question lately. Who had the authority to change the way Georgia and other states certified their absentee ballots during the recent Federal election? Who won the authority to be inaugurated as President on January 20? And over the next few years, Republicans will likely challenge the new Democrat Congress and administration's authority to do all manner of things with which they disagree.

But questions of authority simply didn't exist in the place and time that Matthew describes. Capernaum, along with all of Galilee, was ruled by Herod Antipas, son of the King Herod who had welcomed the wisemen and had slain the Bethlehem babes at the time of Jesus' birth. But King Herod's power had rested solely on the fact that the Roman Senate had appointed him to be King of the Jews. And in the same way his son Antipas was little more than a puppet of Rome. Antipas had been given the title of ethnarch, not king, and he controlled his territory with soldiers trained and armed by Rome.

And so, while the Galilean city of Capernaum was technically under the authority of Herod Antipas, it was actually the prefect of the cohort of Roman soldiers stationed in the area who really kept the peace day in and day out. It was the prefect who was really responsible for quelling the sorts of riots that we saw at our Federal Capitol last Wednesday.

And in order to accomplish this task, the prefect divided his forces into companies called centuries of 80 to 100 men, each commanded by a centurion, such as the one we meet in verse 5. So, just as this centurion explains in verse 9, the lines of authority were clear and absolute. He answered to his prefect, and his soldiers answered to him. And, although this last part went unstated, all the residents of Capernaum had better answer to the Roman soldiers – for except for the very few who might have been Roman citizens, none of the people of Capernaum had any real rights at all.

So, this centurion was very near to the top of the food chain in the town where he lived. Because of his authority, he was probably accustomed to being treated with deference, and perhaps even respect. And let's be honest – we Americans are accustomed to playing a similar role on the world stage, aren't we? For the last 100 years, our military and economic power has been unparalleled. And even in difficult economic times like these, our dollar and our bonds continue to be in great demand around the world. Like the Ancient Romans, we know what it's like to be on top.

But as any honest student of world history must admit, we haven't used our power to subjugate the world the way the Ancient Romans did, or the way that conquerors from Napoleon to Hitler have tried to do. Instead, time and time again, our young men have gone into battle to try to keep other countries free – free from Fascism, free from Communism, and most recently free from the violence that Muslim rulers so often unleash even on their fellow believers.

But unlike the Ancient Romans, we have not demanded tribute from those whom we've defeated. We have not annexed subjugated territory into our empire, like they did in the case of Judea. Instead, we spent millions of dollars trying to rebuild the factories and homes of our former foes after

World War II. We spent millions more building schools and hospitals in Afghanistan and Iraq. And as General Mark Clark observed, “All we asked for was enough soil in which to bury our gallant dead.”

Yes, we Americans have a lot in common with this Ancient Roman centurion. For in spite of his authority, he doesn’t seem to have swaggered around the streets of Capernaum like a bully. Instead, Luke’s account of this same event indicates that he was a generous man, giving large donations to the local religious leaders so they could build a synagogue, a place for study and prayer. In fact, those same Jewish leaders went so far as to say that this Gentile centurion loved their people.

Now, we certainly know that he loved the servant that he mentions to Jesus. For the Greek word he uses for him is not “doulos,” which means slave. Instead, he calls him “pais,” a word that refers to a child. It thus seems that this powerful, generous man also had a soft spot, even for those over whom he held absolute, unquestioned authority.

Yes, I think we Americans recognize this centurion – a powerful guy, but a good guy, a tough guy with a heart of gold. He’s the kind of guy we look up to, the kind of guy we admire, the kind of guy with whom we like to think we have a lot in common.

But there’s one more reason that we modern Americans understand this ancient centurion only too well – his helplessness in the face of disease. For we cannot deny that this new virus has brought us to our knees. It has stretched our medical resources to the limit, with an increasing number of new cases being reported in Mississippi every day. It has crippled our economy, throwing millions out of work across the country, and shuttering thousands of small businesses, some of which will never reopen. Moreover, different states have reacted to it by making it easier to vote by mail, throwing our entire electoral system and its results into confusion. And just as was the case with this Roman centurion, neither our power nor our prestige, neither our generosity nor our goodwill have been able to shield us from this virus or its terrible consequences.

But, if we’re honest, we’ll admit that this sort of helplessness isn’t really anything new. We’ve all stood at the bedsides of sick loved ones, unable to ease their suffering, longing for them to improve only to see them slip away from us. No, this centurion is no stranger to us, not by any means.

So, what do we do in the face of our helplessness? What do we do when neither our government nor our skills, neither our money nor our influence, neither our family nor our friends can solve our most urgent problems? We could follow the example of those who have been rioting in our streets ever since summer, trashing neighborhoods in cities from Portland to Minneapolis, defacing or destroying monuments from San Francisco to Richmond, and now even breaking into the Federal Capitol building in Washington. We could rage and storm and scream, taking out our fears and frustrations on others, just as so many have done through all kinds of media over the last year.

Or we could take another look at this centurion, this guy we recognize and admire, this guy who was so confident and capable, so respected and admired. For when he came face to face with his own helplessness, when he reached an impasse that none of his skills or training or resources could overcome, he simply did what any soldier is trained to do – he went up the chain of command. He

appealed to someone who had the ability and the resources to accomplish what he could not. In short, he went to Jesus.

But why? Why would a Roman centurion place such faith in a Jewish rabbi? Undoubtedly, it was because he had heard about Jesus' tremendous healing powers. After all, at the end of chapter 4, Matthew makes it plain that Jesus had been travelling through the whole region of Galilee healing people and even casting out demons. Last week we noticed that in the previous passage, Jesus had even healed a man of leprosy, a disease from which there was no known cure. It was thus no secret that Jesus had the ability to heal this centurion's servant and so that's exactly what the centurion implored Jesus to do.

And his certainty points to the first major component of true faith in Christ – placing our confidence, our trust completely in His power. True faith involves turning away from everyone and everything else in which we are tempted to place our trust, and looking to Jesus alone, not only for our spiritual salvation, but to provide for us and our loved ones in this world as well.

For isn't this the same sort of faith that David expressed in our responsive reading from Psalm 27? Like the centurion, David was a military man, and one who had experienced great victories on the battlefield, overcoming the Philistines in spite of their vastly superior weaponry, and even defeating the giant Goliath. And yet David looked to the Lord to be his light and his salvation and his stronghold. He looked to the Lord to hide him on the day of trouble, to set him high upon a rock where his enemies could not reach him. In spite of his tremendous successes and abilities, David still placed his faith completely in God.

But there's more to true faith besides placing our confidence in God's power, His ability to help us. We must also submit ourselves completely to God's authority, acknowledging that the choice to save us is His alone. After all, in Psalm 27, David doesn't say to God, "You've got to help me!" Instead, he humbles himself before God, asking God to hear his prayers, asking God to be gracious enough to answer them.

In the same way, the centurion, in his very matter-of-fact, very military way, acknowledged Jesus' complete authority over the situation. In fact, he expressed his certainty that, just as his prefect issued commands to him, and just as he gave commands to his soldiers, Jesus has absolute authority to dismiss his servant's sickness with a similar word of command.

Moreover, the centurion understood that the exercise of such absolute authority did not require Jesus' physical presence, any more than he himself had to take charge of all the rioters or thieves that he dispatched his soldiers to arrest. The existence of authority and the expression of command was sufficient to carry out the centurion's own orders, and he was confident that the same thing was true for Jesus.

So, how about us? Does this sort of calm confidence in Jesus' power and absolute submission to His authority characterize our own faith in Him? When the tough times come, when we find ourselves in way over our heads, do we ask for His gracious help? Do we place ourselves at His disposal, obedient

to His commands and submissive to His sovereign will, even when elections don't go our way, even when viruses won't go away?

Well, if not, if we admit that we have instead given ourselves over to anxiety or anger or even to bitterness in the face of our difficult circumstances, then we have come to the third essential component of true faith. For true faith in Christ not only involves confidence in His power and submission to His authority. It also must include an understanding of our own unworthiness, a conviction that we are not, in fact, deserving of the help we so desperately need and so earnestly seek.

Such a humble perspective was never far from David's mind. In Psalm 51 he openly acknowledged not only that he had been a sinner even from his birth, but that he was personally guilty, in need of God's cleansing, in need of a new heart and a right spirit. And although we don't see the same sort of unambiguous confession in Psalm 27, David does beg God not to turn him away in anger. Instead of confidently striding into God's presence as one who had been anointed to be king, David begs God not to cast him off or forsake him. Oh, yes, David knew he did not deserve any of God's blessings.

And our Roman centurion understood the same thing. In spite of his powerful position, in spite of his considerable authority, he did not insist that Jesus ritually defile Himself by entering the house of a Gentile. Instead, he went so far as to acknowledge what the Jews thought about uncircumcised people like him – he admitted that he was not worthy to have a respected rabbi come into his home.

Now, for a Roman centurion to humble himself in this way before a powerless Jew, well, that was nothing short of astounding. It's no wonder that Jesus marveled at the centurion's faith, for He certainly wouldn't see much of it among His own people. No matter how clearly He fulfilled the Scriptures God had been giving to them for hundreds of years, the religious leaders who claimed the most intimate knowledge of those Scriptures would condemn Him to death.

So, it would be easy for us to read this passage simply as ancient history, admiring the centurion while we condemn all those narrow-minded, ignorant religious leaders. And It would be just as easy to assume this passage has nothing to teach us – after all, we all know that Jesus is the Almighty Son of God, right?

But let's go further. Let's face the key question this passage raises for all of us modern Americans: will Jesus find the faith of the centurion among us today? Will He find us truly acknowledging our unworthiness, our sin, our need of a Savior to wash us clean? Will He find us truly submissive to His sovereign will, confident in the goodness of His providence no matter what difficult circumstances may come our way? Will He find us placing complete confidence in His power not only to save us from our sins but to guide us and protect us, no matter how dark and confusing our times might become?

Jesus promises that those who place such faith in Him, those who share the faith of the Roman centurion and the faith of David, those who share the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will indeed have a place in the kingdom of heaven. So, as David encouraged us, let us be strong and take courage, even

in the face of our weakness and unworthiness. No matter what happens, let us wait for the Lord in true faith.