

## Speak the Word

June 2, 2013

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### ***Scripture: Luke 7:1-10***

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak 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 the slave does it." When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

### ***Sermon:***

The focus of my message this morning is advocacy, endorsement, and the way we extend and share one another's credibility.

But before I start in on all of that, I want to say something about the troubling presence of slavery in the Gospel. There are a number of occasions during Jesus' ministry where he encounters both slaves and slave owners, but it is not clear through these interactions what Jesus' opinion was regarding slavery. And this is a problem, isn't it? Jesus was outspoken. He was prophetic and radical and was not afraid of creating discord in an effort to initiate change... so why wasn't he calling for the liberation of his enslaved sisters and brothers? It's troubling to me that Jesus refers to a slave's obedience to his master as an example of how we should express our faith to God. I understand the reference... a slave is loyal and obedient, a slave does not question when commanded, a slave belongs to an owner... and yes, the centurion is a generous and loving slave owner, just as our God is generous and loving... but even so, I don't find the example appealing at all. Slavery implies coercion and assumes we do not have a choice...

but we do have a choice. For all intents and purposes, there may be very little that separates servants from slaves, but free will is a remarkably important distinction. I choose to view my ministry, my faith and devotion to God, as a service I have entered into in God's name, not as an enslavement I was born into or coerced into. That's all.

Now then, an important part of this story takes place behind the scenes. There is a commissioning of sorts that occurs between the centurion and the Jewish leadership in Capernaum. The centurion has been very generous with his support for the building of a synagogue in the city, so when he hears Jesus is coming, he sends the Jewish elders to advocate on his behalf and on behalf of the centurion's beloved slave who has fallen ill and is near death. Of course, the centurion is a Gentile, and he is a soldier in service to Rome. What or who could compel Jesus to help him?

Advocating on behalf of someone or something is a powerful gesture, and it is one that carries some risk. An advocate is taking a chance. If I speak on your behalf, if I offer you my support, I am risking my own reputation, my own credibility, and my own authority on your behalf. For this reason, we really should not advocate anything without thoughtful and deliberate consideration... after all, it is our own reputations we are putting at stake. And yet today, you and I have been commissioned as advocates for others in ways we have not agreed to with thoughtful and deliberate consideration. In fact, we may not even be aware of what we're advocating.

So who has commissioned you? Who's name goes before you? Who and what do you endorse? In some ways, it depends on how closely we look. On an entirely superficial level, don't the companies whose products we use commission us? Think about our clothing today. Nike, Addidas, Abercrombie, etc. Are there any athletes competing in professional sports who have not been commissioned by a clothing company? Michael Jordan wear's Nike, but doesn't Nike kind of wear Michael Jordan? Who is endorsing whom? And as a result, a strange cycle has been created... You wear our sneakers and they will make you credible. I will wear your sneakers and make them credible. Together we will be in-credible, and we will make millions!

Are you commissioned by your job or career? " Hello, Hello, Nice to meet you. So, what do you do? " Our work say something about our authority and where it comes from. So whom do you work for? And

what does that say about you, and what does your employment say about your employer? Mutual credibility? Perhaps.

What about our families? I go forth into this world with my father's name. Growing up in Glastonbury, CT, I was reminded often of how important it was for my brothers and me to stay out of the Police Log in the local paper. After all, our family name was at stake. My family's credibility and, perhaps authority (?), were at stake. What credibility does your family name bring you? What credibility do you bring your family name?

How about God? Are we commissioned by our faith? Have we been given credibility and authority as members of First Congregational church? I carry the credibility of this place everywhere I go, and I wish for nothing more than to bring credibility to this place. Believing this is empowering. So when I go forth, I do so as a champion for God, and this church, and you. I am your advocate, your endorser, and your emissary.

It is important for us to be champions for the things we believe in. It is so much easier for us to criticize than it is for us to endorse. We all have an opinion, but for some reason, we seem to be much more comfortable sharing our negative opinions than our positive ones. "That place is awful, that book was terrible, Oh, you don't want to go there, his preaching is just awful!" I'm not going to do that anymore. From now on, I have decided if I am going to share my criticism, I will equally share my endorsement. (Burrito Loco story)

The Centurion never actually meets Jesus or speaks to him. For this reason, the centurion's request for Jesus' healing intervention is like a prayer mediated to Jesus through others. Thus it is implied by the story that Jesus hears the prayers of the faithful, Jew and Gentile alike, and I hope it encourages us to believe that when we turn to the Lord in need our requests will be answered. Also, in this regard, this story assures me that praying for other people is also effective. Who has commissioned you? Who has called upon you to advocate on his or her behalf? When we pray for someone, we are endorsing that person and his or her needs to God. We are offering the credibility of our faith, and in response, God offers us the credibility of his love. Together we become in-credible.

Unlike the Jewish emissaries he commissions to speak on his behalf, the centurion's faith in Jesus is not built on a foundation of experience or culture... it is not built on anything... it is blind faith. It is pure faith. "When you wish upon a star makes no difference who you are, when you wish upon a star your dreams come true." Like a child blowing out candles and making a wish, the centurion believes in Jesus so much that his belief alone will make Jesus come true!

It doesn't hurt that the centurion is presented as a righteous dude. He is an all around good guy. He is well regarded by the Romans, so much so he was given authority over 100 men. He is well regarded by the Jews, having generously paid for the building of a synagogue so they would have a place to worship. Yes, it is true he owned slaves, but he loved them and cared for them and for the sake of one of them, he was willing to humble himself before the Jewish prophet. He sent friends and servants to plead for a miracle, to plead for the life of his slave. Even though he has not met Jesus, because of what he has heard he has faith that Jesus can help. He respectfully defers to Jewish sensitivities about entering a Gentile's house, and although he is a man of position and power, he does not want Jesus to be troubled by his problems. Seen in this light, the centurion is an example of faithfulness among the faithless.

A centurion was a powerful figure. He was the commander of a military unit of a hundred soldiers, with all of the authority of Herod and Rome behind him. With such authority, he was accustomed to doing things by simple command. He ordered soldiers and servants, and his instructions were carried out without question or hesitation. This understanding of power serves as a foil to set forth the greater power of Jesus' word. Jesus' word transcends the limits of human authority and power. Jesus' word commands the storm, Jesus' word commands water to become wine, bread to become flesh, wine to become a promise... Jesus' word commands disease and death itself! And what is so amazing is that Jesus has been commissioned as an advocate for you, as an endorser of you, as a champion for you. Jesus' Word gives credibility to us all... Love. This is the Good News. Selah.