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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/29/2016, The Second Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 7:1-10

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text refers to the centurion's experience with authority. He says this to Jesus:

But say the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸For I 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." (Luke 7:7-8, RSV)

My theory is that from time to time, this old world sure needs people like this – people who are experienced and comfortable with authority. When chaos strikes, when things are topsy-turvy on the battlefield or in time of terrorism or disaster like earthquake or oil spill in the seas, then we need people who are comfortable saying, "Do this," and expect people to do it! That way people can rally round, and there can be some coherence to their efforts.

Each time this Gospel Lesson comes around nowadays, I cannot help but think of what is called "The Miracle on the Hudson" back in 2009, when Chesley Burnett "Sully" Sullenberger, III landed U.S. Air Flight 1549 on the Hudson River. He saved the lives of the 155 passengers and crew that day. You remember the event, I bet. As the flight was leaving LaGuardia Airport, a flock of geese struck the jet engines, disabling them. Let me read aloud an account of what happened next:

After a quick assessment of the damage and attempts to restart the engines, Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger called out to his first officer Jeffrey Skiles: "My aircraft!" As was protocol, Skiles replied, "Your aircraft." Sullenberger took the controls.

He nosed the aircraft down to retain airspeed. After evaluating the options for 60 seconds, Sullenberger realized there was no way to safely return to LaGuardia or to make it to another airport. He told the air traffic controller, "We can't do it. We're gonna be in the Hudson."

Sullenberger maneuvered the 100,000-pound aircraft as it glided ever lower in the sky. At 900 feet, he passed over the

George Washington Bridge. Then he leveled out the wings and told the passengers, “Brace for impact.”

... the pilot set the plane down on the Hudson River with skill and confidence. After the landing, he quickly left the cabin to make sure everyone got out safely. Crawling through 36-degree water, Sullenberger and Skiles saw to it that no passenger was left behind.¹

So, Sully cries out “My aircraft” and the co-pilot responds “Your aircraft.” Sully told the passengers “Brace for impact,” and I bet they braced for impact. Here is a man who was used to saying, “Do this,” and people do it. Such a one was the centurion in today’s Gospel Lesson.

This centurion displays three traits – traits that do not always fit well together, but which constitute a blessing on earth when they do fit well together. I mean this: the centurion was a good man, he was accustomed to authority, and he was humble. But this is a rather unstable combination. Some good people, for example are not used to authority. They are quiet or shy or simply do not have much experience with authority. Then, going the other way round, some people who are accustomed to authority are not good people. They are more like cruel tyrants. And then, as a third point, some people who are accustomed to authority are not humble. Maybe they were when they started out, but the passing of the years, and their getting used to people obeying them, work to make them proud. They are no longer humble. But this man – the centurion in today’s Gospel story – seems to be a lovely combination of all three. He is a good man, accustomed to authority, and yet a humble man. Let’s look at these three traits, in him, and in us. First, let’s speak of authority.

When I entered the U.S. Air Force Academy long ago, when I was young, we cadets were almost immediately told that the moment we became cadets at the Academy, we outranked every enlisted man in the Air Force. But, we were firmly informed, “do *not* try to exercise that authority.” If you have any experience with the military, you can understand why. It simply is not right for some cadet – some college kid - to try to boss around an enlisted man – a grown man who might have fought in wars, who has life-and-death responsibility for his fellow soldiers, and maybe for a family. Later, in one of the speeches by the Superintendent of the Academy, that officer made the same point. He said that he still referred to the master sergeant on his staff as “Sir.” Here he was, a three-star general, referring to his sergeant as “Sir.” But master sergeants are some of the most impressive people you will ever meet. They have personal authority that others recognize.

This centurion seemed to have both kinds of authority. He had *legal* authority, with the awesome power of the Roman empire standing behind his commands, but

¹ <http://www.lutheranhour.org/sermon.asp?articleid=21759>

also he had *personal* authority. *Legal* authority can be ignored or evaded in a pinch if the subordinates do not respect the officer. But not *personal* authority — it remains in place to be reckoned with. This centurion seems to have had *full* authority. He was the kind of person kind of person people obeyed, without hesitation.

This man recognizes another such a one in Jesus. The centurion is used to reality springing to attention when he issues a command. He fully expects reality to do the same when Jesus gives a command. “But say the word, and let my servant be healed.” With these words, this Roman soldier puts into words what all of creation will one day declare: that Jesus Christ is “King of kings and Lord of lords.” This soldier anticipates the day when all shall bend the knee before Jesus, as St. Paul says in Philippians 2:

⁹Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11, RSV)

For each of us, we have some experience with authority. In many spheres of life, there are people over us, directing us, hopefully encouraging us.

But also, for each of us, we usually exercise authority over some other people. When we do exercise authority, it is our chance to shine and to do some good in this world. “Authority” is not a bad word. Authority permits the choir to produce beauty, the courts to further justice, the cardiac care unit to function smoothly, the city to meld into some kind of peace and good order. If you are a parent, enjoy your authority while it lasts. You can do some real good by saying “Do this,” and expecting it to be done. Authority, within the limits of the law, permits you to put into action what life has taught you, what you have come to believe, what you have learned from Christ. It gives you a chance to have some impact on the world, and if you are a Christian, I think your impact is going to be a good one.

So, that is the first trait this centurion brings to mind. He is accustomed to authority.

Next, let’s consider the fact that he is a good man. His townsfolk testify to that. They say to Jesus:

“He is *worthy* to have you do this for him, ⁵for he loves our nation, and he built us our synagogue.” (Luke 7:4-5, RSV)

He must have been a very good man indeed for the Jewish citizens of Capernaum to have said this about a Roman soldier. Here he is, a representative of the hated occupying power – the Roman Empire. And he is among them not simply as a Gentile, but a Gentile with power, with authority. He could have abused his

power. Plenty of other soldiers did. That's why John the Baptist urged soldiers to repent in the concrete way of being or becoming honest people:

Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." (Luke 3:14, RSV)

John had to urge such things because robbing and falsely accusation and being discontent with wages were notorious problems for occupying soldiers. But not for this man, this centurion in our story. We hear no complaint of injustice toward him. Indeed, we hear that he was fond of his Jewish neighbors and he built their synagogue for them.

I am reading a detective novel these days by Louise Penny — a novel called *Fatal Grace*. It is one in a series of novels about a Quebec inspector named Armand Gamache. People like Gamache. I like Gamache. Young detectives, when they first meet him, soon stand up straighter and want to do their job better, because they are impressed by Gamache and want to please him.

Some people are like that. Others recognize in them that they are people of substance, people of virtue, good people. This centurion seems to have been like that. "He is *worthy* to have you do this for him," the people say. Why, even Jesus ends up being impressed by this man:

[Jesus] marveled at him, and turned and said to the multitude that followed him, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." (Luke 7:9, RSV)

Perhaps we can say this: Authority cries out for goodness. Authority is at its best when the one in authority is also a good person. Let us try to be that kind of a person. Again, we all exercise authority in this world, in big ways and in little ways. Let us try to be the kind of people about whom others will say, "I am content, I am glad that this person is in charge, because I recognize that this person is a worthy one."

And this lead me to my last point about the centurion. He was a humble person. "He is worthy," the townsfolk say. But as for him, he simply says, "I am *not worthy* to have you come under my roof" (Luke 7:6, RSV) This is the background for what is called the Prayer of Humble Access. It is a lovely prayer we find in the Roman Mass:

Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldst enter under my roof, but only say the word, and my soul shall be healed.

The exercise of authority can run to the head. It can make us proud, make us forget our mission, make us forget the value of the people under us, even make us forget Christ whom we should above all try to serve. Somehow this centurion

retained his humility. In his greatness of soul, he was able to recognize someone before Whom he was glad to humble himself. It was as if this centurion of old was joining us in the Hymn of Praise we regularly sang during the Easter Season:

Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain,
whose blood set us free to be people of God.

Worthy is Christ! This centurion knew it, sensed it, and conducted himself humbly before Christ.

Someday you and I are going to meet Christ face to face. As young detectives stand up straighter before the good inspector, each of us – no matter how gruff or criminal we might have been in our past – each of us then will know that we have met our match, we have met the One we cannot help but acknowledge as being good and being worthy of our all, even now, today, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.