

“Under Whose Authority?!?”

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Old Testament Lesson – Psalm 96:1-9 New Testament Lesson – Luke 7:1-10

If you do an Internet search on the words “The healing power of,” you’ll see suggestions pop up such as: herbs, prayer, touch, whole fruit, light, plants, the mind, forgiving, music, faith, art, Reiki, love, sports, blues dancing, yoga, trees, natural foods, crystals, song, laughter, hugs, movement, sound, cockroaches, self-love, fashion, olive leaves, pets, honey, truth, writing, acupuncture, humor, family, and more.

All of these things are said to have healing powers. And as such, they become tools in our arsenal against what ails us. And yet, they are so much more than just tools to be used – they are blessings from God to be honored and respected.

The foods that were mentioned like whole fruit and herbs, our relationships with family and friends, and our love for one another, faith and prayer and religious practices, even sports and dancing and art – these are all gifts from God that can bring us healing in body and soul. And even though they do have useful functions, we can learn to see them and appreciate them as more than just tools.

Similarly, our New Testament lesson today is about seeing and appreciating people as more than just tools. The centurion “had a slave whom he valued highly,” says Luke, a slave “who was ill and close to death,” a slave the centurion no doubt treated more like a tool to get things done than as a person to be respected. The only reason a centurion would care whether a slave lived or died is because he valued him highly, as a slave. Otherwise, he’d free him and treat him as a friend.

So with his slave close to death, the centurion, Luke tells us, “sent some Jewish elders” to Jesus. The centurion is using his connections among the religious leaders of his day to gain access to Jesus; he’s using them as tools to get what he wants.

And sure enough, the religious leaders go to Jesus asking him to, quote “come and heal (the) slave.” Well that sounds like it’s now Jesus whom the centurion wants to use to get what he wants, saying “come and heal.”

The centurion looks at Jesus as just another person under his command, like one of his soldiers. "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." That's what it's like to be a centurion with people to command, so it's only natural for him to send for Jesus, saying "come and heal," heal my slave.

We would never treat Jesus like that; we would never treat another person like that, would we? Well, honestly, we treat each other like that all the time. "Honey, get me the remote." "Hey, grab me that box up there, would ya?" "Get out of here! Mom, he's bothering me."

Or, "We need more church members to fill the pews and keep the lights on." Or, "The appointment was an hour ago – just wait till I see that doctor," "or that repair man," "or the cable guy." And yet these and all the people in our lives, they're human beings, not tools to be ordered around, and used and then tossed aside.

Even the religious leaders in Luke's story have a tendency to treat people as tools, saying to Jesus, "(This centurion) is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us."

They've attached love to what the centurion has done for them. They look at that centurion and see only their brand new synagogue staring back at them – cha-ching.

So, if the centurion has it wrong, and if the religious leaders have it wrong, and if we so often have it wrong – then why does Jesus heal the slave – why should Jesus intervene on behalf of anyone of us? What allows us to align ourselves with Jesus-power to heal?

Jesus healed the centurion's slave because somewhere along the line, the centurion's perspective about Jesus and God and his fellow human beings changed. Somewhere along the line he went from seeing Jesus as a tool to be commanded and used to seeing Jesus as the Son of God to be honored and respected.

And that's what we must strive for, as well, being ever mindful of who Jesus is in relation to God and us. When the centurion got it straight about who Jesus is in relation to God and himself, his whole outlook on life changed, and he gained a proper appreciation of and perspective about other people. And this is what led to the healing he sought from Jesus.

The centurion came to see that it's not about what people can do for us, it's about who people are to us – fellow human beings worthy of our love and respect in their own right, not tools for achieving some

goal or desire or need. We see this shift in the centurion's perspective in what happens next in Luke's story.

Luke tells us that when Jesus was approaching 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; ... But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority."

In that statement, the centurion's entire perspective about Jesus and God and the people in his life changed. Now he's sending friends to Jesus, where as before, he sent religious leaders, political operatives. The centurion is now treating Jesus as a friend to be honored and respected, not a tool to be commanded and used. Do we show enough honor and respect for Jesus in how we live our lives?

The centurion also demonstrates a new-found respect for Jesus as Lord, saying "I am not worthy." And he treats Jesus as the Son of God, as having the power and authority of God, saying to him, "I also am a man set under authority." He respects Jesus' authority to heal on behalf of God. Do we?

Do we trust in Jesus to heal the broken places in our lives, in Jesus-time and manner of healing, or do we see Jesus and God more as tools to be summoned in prayer to do our bidding?

What has us treat Jesus and God and the people in our lives as tools to be used, what has us think that God should do our bidding when it comes to our health and happiness? What are we missing in our perspective and understanding about God, and other people, and our place in the world? What we're missing is the proper perspective on God's power and authority in our lives.

A priest once traveled to see a renowned spiritual teacher, to spend time on a retreat with him. "Master," he said, "I come to you seeking enlightenment." "Well, then," said the master, "for the first exercise of your retreat, go into the courtyard, tilt your head back, stretch out your arms and wait until I come for you."

Just as the priest arranged himself in that position, the rains came. And it rained. It rained the rest of the afternoon. Finally, the old master came back. "Well, priest," he asked, "have you been enlightened today?" "Are you serious?" asked the priest. "I've been standing here with my head up in the rain for an hour. I'm soaking wet. I feel like a fool!" The master said, "Well, priest, for the first day

of a retreat that sounds like enlightenment to me.”¹ The priest thought he had it all figured out. He thought he could just put himself under the authority of the old master, and his life would be so much better. But what he forgot is there’s only one power and authority we can trust in life, and that’s God.

Only by turning our will and our lives over to God can we gain a proper perspective in life. Only then do we see other people and ourselves in a balanced and healthy way. Only then do we learn to trust in God in all areas of our lives. And only then – with ourselves placed fully under God’s authority – is true healing possible, both body and soul.

Many of us have someone in our lives who is suffering in pain or struggling through an illness. For most of us, life has not necessarily worked out as we hoped and dreamed. We all have loved ones who disappoint us, people who fail to meet all our needs.

And many of us have come to suspect that life’s just not fair and that maybe God just doesn’t care. These thoughts and feelings are natural, they’re only human. We are only human. And if we rely only on ourselves to get through life, then those negative thoughts and feelings will get the better of us.

But when we place Jesus above all things in our lives (as in we live our lives by his teaching and authority), that’s when we gain the proper perspective of who God is and who we are.

Like the centurion, our task is to look at those areas of our lives where we seek to command and control, those areas where we demand that things be the way we want them. Our task is to look at our lives – moment to moment, day by day – and ask ourselves, where is it that I’m trusting in my own sense of power and knowledge apart from God, where is it that I’m exerting my will over and above God’s will. Where is it that my faith is failing me?

When we learn to place ourselves under God’s authority, to trust in God’s desire to bless our lives and the lives of our loved ones, that’s when we begin to cultivate a quiet confidence, in all circumstances of life, knowing that God is in charge, and that in living our lives in that way, we encounter life’s greatest blessings.

¹ Joan Chittister, *Songs of the Heart: Reflections on the Psalms* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2011), 23-24.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Increase our faith, O God. The faith of the centurion we'll here from today in Luke's gospel account was made pure and true. He came to believe that you could heal, and you healed. Help our unbelief!

We put so much trust in modern medicine and human knowledge that we forget that you are the great healer, the great physician!

So we ask you to heal those who are sick today. We believe that you can, and we ask you in faith, believing that you will.

We ask you to heal the hurting in our lives, to mend our brokenness, whatever that might be.

And while we wait for healing, give us faith and a sense of trust to know that we are not forgotten, that you are not far off.

For it is in the assurance of your presence with us today and always that we lift up our voices in prayer.

People, as we prepare to sing the Lord's Prayer, let us also lift up our heads, our eyes unto the Lord, as we join now in singing:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.