

New Horizons

That centurion understood authority. He knew the importance of taking one's request to the person most able to fulfill it. The tutor with whom I worked as I prepared for ordination predicted that the next big debate within the church would be around the authority of Scripture. How right he was! What is said and who said it have become the center of debate on many subjects --- sometimes taking priority over the essential question. The background and basis for the view or proposal get set aside as personalities receive close examination. We see this acted out in our present election year rhetoric. We are left with the question: Who will we allow to be in charge?

This was the issue for Israel as it reflected on years of wilderness wandering, a series of kings and the raising up of prophets who challenged the curiosity about local gods and cultic practices. Elijah's mission was to reveal Yahweh as dominant in a time when Baal was the dominant god. Worship ritual centered around Baal was the approved state religion. Elijah has challenged Baal's power and called for no rainfall. Ahab saw the drought that resulted as Baal's Act against Elijah. Today's reading is the showdown moment. A mighty demonstration persuaded the people and their prophets that Yahweh's power far exceeded that of Baal.

In the days of the young church Paul was determined to focus believers on the gospel of Jesus Christ, calling them to live fully as God's people. Paul takes no personal credit for his authority, claiming only his call and commission by Christ as his credential. The Christ event is foundation and focus for his proclamation and action. He wants all people to understand Jesus as the Christ and Messiah.

That Christ event: the life and teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is the content and focus of all faithful preaching and teaching in the Christian church. Individuals called to faith in Jesus Christ find themselves strangely motivated to live and act more in accordance with the teachings of faith. That behavior grows out of relationship with a living Lord who continues to direct the faithful through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Believers experience an inner certainty, a knowledge of "what is right" and live with confidence.

The centurion understood the power and responsibility that accompany authority. He knew where he fit "in the system" of his time, his place in his world. He has come to know about this Jesus. He recognizes that the system of which he is a part cannot achieve the allegiance Jesus has received. He pronounced himself "unworthy" to approach Jesus with his request for healing of his servant. He sent his servants who attested to his goodness. Once again it is the non-Jewish believer who recognized Jesus as the one with the power and ability to heal. Jesus saw in the centurion true faith, recognition of God's power. He gave thanks to God for this expression of faith. His prayer of thanksgiving he set in motion the servant's healing.

Who is in charge here? This is always the question before congregations in transition. Who says so? Who decides? In our Presbyterian Church we have a very orderly way of naming persons to be in charge and electing them to positions of decision-making and responsibility to carry on the maintenance of congregational life and action. Beyond that it is the people of the church who provide the foundation for decisions and actions.

Our church belongs first of all to Christ. Then it belongs to the believers who have gathered in Christ's name to witness to the good news of grace and justice and love our world needs to experience. We are called to become as Christ to this world. We seek God's direction and presence as we carry Christ's message into the world in mission and service. How shall our faith be made known?

I would suggest to you that timing is on our side. Next week we will have a brief congregational Meeting to elect an elder and a deacon and at-large members of the Nominating Committee. We will be placing in their hands the task of leading this congregation as it discovers the future God holds for it.

In this season of remembering, centered around the national Memorial Day celebration, let's take some time to do some remembering. Let's remember the people who have preceded us in the many phases of our lives and paved the way for our development, education, progress. Let's give thanks for those who have shared their faith stories with us and deepened our understanding.

Let's remember to speak up, as Elijah and Paul did to very specific situations. Elijah challenged the peoples' belief in a god who could do nothing for them. Paul challenged the core of the message the Galatians had received, urging them to return to the central character of their faith, Jesus Christ --- and to make him the motivator and focus for all they taught and did.

We are surrounded by false prophets today as well. We are enticed and seduced by many of the world's gods. It is important to keep our focus on the Christ and to serve only him. It is time to live out the "so what" of our faith. So what difference does salvation in Jesus Christ mean to you and your life? How does it impact your daily living? What are the ways in which this congregation can nurture that living faith for you? ... for others? What expression of faith shall we make that will demonstrate to this community and the world our commitment to Jesus Christ? How shall we make ourselves known as people belonging to God?

In our baptism we are credentialed to proclaim Christ's love for the world. May we go forth to make that love known in the lives of others and give glory to God. Alleluia, Amen.