

VETERANS DAY
AND THE LESSON FROM THE CAPERNAUM CENTURION

LUKE 7:1-10

INTRODUCTION

Tomorrow is Veterans Day. We are delighted to have Bob and residents of the State Veterans Home present to help us to remember the occasion. We have a significant number of people in our congregation who have also served in the military forces of the US.

Veterans Day, in distinction from Memorial Day, is intended to honor all of our military veterans who have served our country in wartime and in peace. Prior to 1954 it was called Armistice Day. The holiday was originally intended to honor the veterans of World War I. The date of the remembrance was chosen because the armistice, the cease fire ending hostilities between the Allies and the Central Powers, occurred at 11:00 on the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918.

My grandfather was part of the Thirty-second Division that was sent to France at the beginning of 1918. He was a messenger and orderly for General Haan, who commanded the division. Hostilities concluded by the end of the year. I often asked my grandfather about his experiences in the Great War, as it was called. He was reluctant to tell me everything. He did give me these ribbons and medals from his service.

(PROJECTOR ON--- VIDEO CLIP) He also described to me his participation in the review of the American troops that occurred on Christmas Day in 1918. President Wilson came across the Atlantic that month. He joined General Pershing in various festivities celebrating the end of the war. My grandfather told me about how his unit practiced marching in the wet and the cold the day before the review. Then on Christmas Day of 1918 in Humes, France, they marched before the President, General Pershing, who was in charge of American forces, and other dignitaries.

The experience of Christians with military forces down through the centuries has varied considerably. Sometimes military forces have been used as instruments of oppression and persecution by evil governments. Sometimes military forces have been liberators for Christians and other oppressed people. Some Christians have argued that it is wrong for Jesus followers to have any involvement with the military. Obviously many among us have participated in the military. Some of us have had the experience in the military of liberating oppressed people and being received warmly. Others of us may have had military experience where we have been resented in the lands that we have occupied.

In the last few decades our military forces have found themselves present in places where they have received a mixed reaction. In Vietnam, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and a few other places our troops have found some people who have appreciated them, some who have resented them, and some whose opinion is unknown, which has forced our GIs to always be on guard. For it has not always been obvious who the enemy is.

Such was something of the situation confronting the army officer in the story in the Bible before us this morning. We are going to look at the interaction that this centurion had with Jesus to see what lessons that we can learn which might be of practical value to us.

I.

(PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE BACKGROUND OF THE STORY) Let's consider then for a few moments THE BACKGROUND OF THE STORY. The incident takes place in Galilee, in the northern part of what we call today Israel. (GALILEE MAP 4) This entire region around the Mediterranean was controlled by Rome in the time of Jesus. But unlike the province of Judea to the south, which was ruled by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, Galilee had a vassal king from the area whose name was Herod Antipas.

The particular place which is the scene of action in our story is Capernaum. (CANA CAPERNAUM MAP) This was a fishing village on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, which was actually a fresh water lake. Peter and Andrew and James and John, the disciples of Jesus were from this community. They were fishermen by trade. When Jesus began His public ministry, he adopted Capernaum as his base of operations. (CAPERNAUM AERIAL) This is what it looks like today.

Herod Antipas was the guy in charge of Capernaum and the rest of Galilee. He was the son of Herod the Great, the vassal king who killed the baby boys in Bethlehem in the Christmas story. Herod Antipas was

certainly not as cruel as his father. He ruled Galilee for a long time, from 4 BC until his death in 39 AD. This Herod was raised as a Jew, but he was half Gentile by ancestry. (PROJECTOR OFF)

What the innermost religious convictions of Herod Antipas were is unknown. He probably gave at least outward support to Judaism. We do know from the Gospels that he had John the Baptist killed, though largely at the instigation of his wife. He was curious to know and meet Jesus. His only meeting happened in Jerusalem just before the crucifixion, but Jesus would not talk to him. This Herod was also working for the Romans. He had to get along with them, and he had to collect taxes from the Galileans for the Romans.

All of this is to say that the attitude of the people of Galilee toward Herod Antipas was probably mixed. He was tolerated. He claimed to be a Jew, but he worked with the Romans. He raised taxes for them. Religious Jews would also recognize that the only legitimate king of Jewish people had to be a descendant of David. Herod clearly was not.

Herod also had his own army. The fact that the centurion in our story is a Gentile may say something about the nature of his military force. One would think that a truly Jewish king would have a military force that was Jewish. At least his officers would be Jewish. This guy in our story was not. If this was typical of Herod's army, then we can imagine that there was some public resentment toward the army and toward its commander-in-chief. This centurion may well have had difficulty in keeping the peace and maintaining order because of the authority that he represented and because of his ethnic background.

Probably a centurion in Herod's army had a similar position as did centurions in the Roman army. Roman centurions commanded a unit, if it was at full strength, of 80 men. They were paid well, much better than the average soldier. They usually had earned their way into this position through the demonstration of skill and bravery. They were tough guys.

Besides representing the government of Herod Antipas, the other thing that would have made life difficult for this centurion was his Gentile ethnicity. He had to deal with a racial problem. The Bible says that God chose to bless the nation of Israel centuries earlier. He did not favor the Jews and give them special promises because they were better than anybody else. He did it to show His power and greatness in blessing a small nation and in giving them special promises and blessings so that other people and other countries would come to recognize that the God of Israel is the one true God, the God who is there, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe.

Instead of developing a concern and a compassion for the nations around them, the people of Israel became self-centered and prideful and exclusive. By the time of Christ the general attitude was that everybody who was not a Jew was pretty worthless. Religious Jews would pray a prayer each day that at one point said, **“O God, I give thanks that I am a Jew and not a Gentile.”**

The religious teachers--- the rabbis--- were largely responsible for this attitude. They called Gentiles “children of hell.” Gentiles were not to be trusted. They were not allowed to give testimony in Jewish legal proceedings. Jews were encouraged to have as little dealings with them as possible. Jews would be defiled, or disqualified from certain religious observances for a time, if they had contact with Gentiles. If you touched a Gentile, or entered his house, you were defiled. Rabbis taught that Jews were not to help a Gentile mother who was in the process of delivering a child. The rabbis even said that a Jew should not nourish a Gentile child who had lost his mother, because that would contribute toward raising a child for idolatry. None of these teachings were in the Bible, but this is what the rabbis taught. There is some evidence that Judaism was not as strict in Galilee as it was closer to Jerusalem, but you get a sense from these statements of the cultural situation that was involved with a Gentile centurion dealing with Jewish people.

Jesus did not have the same attitude that other rabbis did. He treated Gentiles with respect. He was also a miracle worker. Jesus had made Capernaum the home base for Himself and His disciples. He had done a fair amount of preaching and teaching. People had witnessed his miracles. His reputation and stories about Him got around. The centurion lived in or near Capernaum. He heard about the reputation of this remarkable rabbi. When one of his servants became seriously ill, he decided to see if this Jesus character would be willing to help his servant.

II.

We come then to the first lesson that I find arising out of our story. It is THE LESSON ABOUT ATTITUDE TOWARD THE MILITARY. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE LESSON ABOUT...) This centurion sent some Jewish leaders to ask Jesus to come and heal his servant. Verse 6 of Luke #7 says, **“And Jesus went with them.”**

This was a radical move on his part. Jesus’ action flew in the face of everything that most Jewish rabbis taught. No good Jew, let alone a rabbi, should enter the home of a Gentile. Jesus was risking His

popularity with the Jewish people. This centurion was not only a Gentile, but he was also a representative of the government that some may have seen as repressive. This Jesus was acting contrary to religious teaching and culture. He claimed to be God in the flesh. Yet he showed great respect just in his willingness to go to this military officer's home.

So the first lesson that I see coming out of this story is that God's people should honor and respect the members of the military. This centurion was probably involved with enforcing the law. So we could extend the lesson to include respect for law enforcement officers. If Jesus was truly a pacifist, as some moderns would portray Him, we might expect that Jesus would want nothing to do with a Gentile centurion. If being nice to a military officer was understood by God as having agreement with the policies of the government he represented, then we might also have expected Jesus to turn away from him. But He did not. Jesus was respectful toward this man.

The teaching of the Apostle Paul later in the New Testament reinforces this idea about respect for government and its representatives. Writing during the reign of Emperor Nero, a man who persecuted Christians (ROMAN 13:1), he wrote in Romans #13, beginning in v. 1, **"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. (ROMANS 13:2) Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed..."** If the New Testament says that about a government which was often hostile toward Christians, how much more do we need to respect the military representatives of that government and those who enforce the law in a country that has religious freedom and political freedom and constitutional protections for individual citizens. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Most centurions in Jesus' day had been involved in killing people. Jesus did not treat this centurion as a murderer. Many of our veterans have had to deal with some pretty horrible things. Some have had to kill people. They have seen comrades killed. Some have come back wounded. Some have come back physically whole, but their minds have been affected. They suffer from PTSD. My grandfather was about my age when he told me as a youngster that decades after his combat experience he was still having nightmares of the war from which he would wake up reaching for his gas mask.

We as Christians should be appreciative of those who serve, and have served, in our American military. We should appreciate our law enforcement officers. We do that with the recognition that they are imperfect people, and that sometimes there are people in these positions who do really bad things that are a bad representation of the vast majority of military people and law enforcement officers. But we need to take note of the example that Jesus sets for us here.

III.

The second lesson that comes out of this story is THE LESSON ABOUT REPUTATION. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE LESSON ABOUT REPUTATION) It is important for all of us to establish a good reputation. Slaves were regarded by Roman law in the first century as property. Many were not treated well at all. The impression that we get from this story is that the Gentile centurion was a man who cared even about slaves. In v. 2 we see that he had a slave “who was highly valued by him.” The centurion cared about him and did not want to see him die. The text says that the poor guy “was at the point of death.”

In v. 3 we learn that the centurion had established a good reputation with the Jewish elders of the local synagogue. This is remarkable, given what we know about the prevailing Jewish attitude toward Gentiles and toward representatives of the civil government. In vv. 4 & 5 we find out the reason for this good reputation. (LUKE 7:4-5). The elders tell Jesus, **“He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue.”**

Somehow this Gentile centurion was able to cut through the prejudice and recognize that there was truth in this Jewish religion. We don’t know how he came to that recognition. Perhaps there was some godly influence in his upbringing. Perhaps that servant who was sick was a godly Jew who demonstrated the love of the true God to his master. Probably these Jewish elders were more noble than many of their contemporaries. Galileans tended not to be as strict in their traditions as religious Jews down by Jerusalem. But to have this kind of relationship with a Gentile and even to allow him to help in building their synagogue was not typical.

(CAPERNAUM SITE) We know the location of the synagogue which the centurion helped to build. The remains of the white building in the center of the picture come from the third century AD. But beneath it archaeologists have discovered the remains of a synagogue that dates to the time of Jesus. Capernaum was always a small town. So it only had one synagogue. This is it. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Obviously this centurion had money. He had at least one slave, and he may have given a substantial amount of money to have this synagogue built in Capernaum. That doesn’t mean that he was on the take. We know that centurions in the Roman army were well paid. They made ten times as much as what the average laborer earned and sometimes considerably more. Probably this Galilean centurion had a similar financial situation.

It is possible also that this centurion’s contribution took the form of human labor. Perhaps he put the men in his unit to work to help in the construction of the building.

The main point is that this man had established a good reputation in the community, and that is something for which all of us should strive. Later in the New Testament the Apostle Paul gives a list of requirements for those who would be church leaders. One of the essential qualities listed is that **“he must have a good reputation with those outside the church.”** That means at the very least that we need to have integrity and honesty in our dealings with other people. This man went beyond that by exhibiting generosity and kindness toward the people among whom he lived. He is a model for us of the kind of reputation to which we should aspire.

IV.

The third lesson that comes out of this story is THE LESSON ABOUT FAITH. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE LESSON ABOUT FAITH) We have already established that the centurion was a good and a generous man. He had a need. One of his slaves was very sick. He had heard about this rabbi Jesus who had taught in the synagogue that he had built and who had performed miracles in healing sick people. The centurion recognized that this man had supernatural power. I doubt at this point that he understood that Jesus was both God and man. He did understand that Jesus might be able to help his servant.

So this centurion sent a request through his Jewish friends, sensing his own unworthiness as a Gentile to make such a request of a Jewish teacher and prophet in person. Verse 6 says that Jesus responds. But as Jesus nears the Gentile’s house, the centurion either sees or hears that Jesus is coming. He sends friends to tell Jesus that He need not enter his house. He realizes that in the view of every other Jewish rabbi, that would be defiling.

(LUKE 7:6) According to vv. 6-8 he says, probably through his representatives, **“Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. (LUKE 7:7) Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. (LUKE 7:8) For I too 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 servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”**

An ancient historian by the name of Polybius describes what Roman centurions were like. (PROJECTOR OFF) He says, **“...they were not so much seekers after danger as men who can command, steady in action and reliable; ought not to be over anxious to rush into fight; when hard-pressed, willing to hold their ground and die at their post.”**

The little that we are told about the centurion in our story seems to fit with this description. This centurion was a no-nonsense kind of guy. He knew about authority. He knew that he had a need in his household, and he perceived that Jesus could meet it. The question in his mind was not, "Can He heal my servant?" His question was: "Is He willing to heal my servant? Given the fact that I am a Gentile and a representative of Herod's government, will He heal my servant?" Once the centurion saw that Jesus was coming, that question was answered. If He was willing to heal his servant, Jesus did not need to enter his house.

Notice Jesus' response in vv. 9 & 10: **"When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.' And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well."** Jesus didn't care about the centurion's religious background. What He cared about was this man's trust in Himself. The Jewish elders commended the man for his good works. But what impressed Jesus was the centurion's faith. He "marvelled" at it.

That verb is never used in the Gospels to describe Jesus' reaction to the faith of a Jew. The only other time that this verb is used in the Gospels to describe Jesus' reaction to a situation is in Mark #6 when Jesus "marvels" at the unbelief of the people of his hometown of Nazareth toward His claims to be the Messiah.

It is the centurion kind of faith that also pleases Jesus today. He doesn't care about our religious background. He is not impressed by our good works. What pleases Him is faith in Himself.

There are two parts of faith. One component is the object of our faith. The other is the trust that we have in that object. A person can have all kinds of trust, but if the object of that trust is unreliable, that faith will be worthless.

I grew up in northern Wisconsin. In the winter I used to go ice fishing and snowmobiling and skating and cross country skiing on frozen lakes. I could be totally convinced that a lake had enough ice to support me, but if there was only a quarter inch of ice on the lake, and I decided to go across it, I was going to go swimming.

There are a lot of people around today who have ideas about God and who have gods of their own making. If we are going to be right with the God who is really there, we have to do it on His terms. We

must have the right God as the object of our faith. The Bible says that Jesus was God who became a human being. He had both a human and a divine nature. He died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. He rose again from the dead to demonstrate that He truly was God. Then He ascended into heaven. This Jesus should be the object of our faith.

The second part of this faith deal is the trust that we put in Jesus. (EPHESIANS 2;8-9) In Ephesians #2 vv. 8 & 9 the Apostle Paul writes, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”** The Bible makes it clear that there is nothing that we can earn from Jesus. The only thing that we can do to acquire this salvation is believe.

I can be standing on the edge of a lake in northern Wisconsin when the ice is a foot thick, wanting to get across to the other side. But unless I am willing to step out and begin to walk across the ice, it is not going to do me any good.

As a young person I believed in my mind that Christ was the Son of God. I believed that He died for my sins and rose from the dead. I even used to pray to God. But I did not truly come into a right relationship with God until I recognized my need to put my trust in Jesus as my personal Savior. It was then that I became a Christian. I hope that you will make that decision if you have not done so already. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In *The Band of Brothers*, written by Stephen Ambrose, and later made into a documentary, Sergeant Skinny Sisk writes a letter to Captain Dick Winters, who led Easy Company of the 101st Airborne Division in WWII. Skinny Sisk describes how this salvation thing worked out for him: **“My career after the war was trying to drink away the truckload of Krauts that I stopped in Holland and the die-hard Nazi that I went up into the Bavarian Alps and killed. Old Moe Alley made a statement that all the killings that I did was going to jump into the bed with me one of these days and they surely did. I had a lot of flash backs after the war and I stared drinking. Ha! Ha!**

“Then my sister’s little daughter four-years-old, came into my bedroom (I was too unbearable to the rest of the family, either hung over or drunk) and she told me that Jesus loved me and she loved me and if I would repent God would forgive me for all the men I kept trying to kill all over again.

“That little girl got to me. I put her out of my room, told her to go to her Mommy. There and then I bowed my head on my Mother’s old feather bed and repented and God forgave me for the war and all the other bad things I had done down through the years. I was ordained in the latter part of 1949 into the ministry...”

The three lessons from our story are these: We need to respect and honor the members of our military and our veterans. We all need to develop a good reputation. We all need to exercise faith in Christ.