

The two lessons we heard today provide us with pictures of power. In the reading from 1 Kings, Elijah showed the foreign prophets that HIS God could run circles around theirs. No butts about it! There was no contest. In fact, when the God of Israel was supposed to make something catch on fire, Elijah had lots of water poured on it first, three times, so that there would be no way to argue against God’s power or Elijah’s authority as God’s prophet. The story is a satisfying read. The “good guys” have a definitive win in the end over the false prophets.

Today’s Gospel lesson, though, offers us an entirely different perspective concerning power and authority. And it’s this view I want to spend some time on, because what happened between Jesus and the Roman centurion seems to speak very clearly to those of us who are trying to follow Jesus today.

We know a lot about human beings trying to appear powerful. Donald Trump, who seems to thrive on intimidating others; performers like Lady Gaga and Madonna, who always have a strange get-up; comedians like Louis CK, who entertain by being shockingly vulgar. Politicians try to convince constituents that they have the power to bring about needed or wanted changes. Even in families, there are power struggles where a person tries to get attention or to be listened to or respected, or to get his/her own way. This can happen in churches, too. Yes, we know a lot about people trying to get power.

Things were not so different in Jesus’ day. Remember that in Jesus’ time Israel was ruled by the occupying Romans. A centurion was a Roman officer who had a lot of power. Gospel-writer Luke let us know that above and beyond the usual status and power of a centurion, this man had the respect of the Jewish leaders in Capernaum, because the elders told Jesus that this centurion had actually built the synagogue for them.

The officer had a slave that he cared about. As a centurion the man would have been used to using his power to get things done, so he used the power he had gained with the Jewish elders to get them to ask this healer everybody was talking about, Jesus, to go to the centurion’s house to help. Important people made the request and told Jesus that this centurion was worthy of his attention.

But then, just when the centurion was ready to receive a home visit from someone who would enhance his prestige and who had a reputation for healing, he did something totally unexpected. When Jesus was getting fairly close to the centurion’s house, the centurion sent some friends to Jesus to tell him that he didn’t need to come, because the centurion was not worthy to have him under his roof and because if Jesus would only speak the word, it would be sufficient to let his servant be healed.

According to E. Louise Williams in *The Christian Century* (5/29/2013), “Some interpret this disinvitation as a kind gesture meant to protect Jesus from the ritual defilement that would result from entering a gentile’s house. But Jesus seemed to see the gesture as something more: a confession of faith. Jesus had the authority and power to heal from a distance. If the centurion’s word could cause people to do his will, then surely Jesus’ word could restore a servant to health. ... Jesus saw the

centurion's faith and called it greater than any he'd found in all of Israel." (Edited a bit by fte)

"The centurion took the lower place, and Jesus praised him for it. This Roman gentile had grasped something that Jesus' own disciples were having difficulty understanding. Jesus went on to teach about authentic authority...that which is about becoming the last, the least, and the servant of all. Jesus himself cared for the shunned, the poor, the least, the one without power...Finally, Jesus gave his own life as the means of giving life to the world." (From *The Christian Century*, May 29, 2013, p. 20, edited)

The non-Jewish Roman commander trusted Jesus' authority even though he had not even met Jesus, and his servant was made well. But we, who claim that we believe in Jesus and have by becoming Christians committed our lives to serving and following him, have trouble trusting him with very much most of the time. We want proof. We want to hear his voice. We want to see results. If our prayers are not answered as we want them to be, we decide that maybe Jesus does not have any power, at least not for us.

Our 2013 world is much more comfortable with the picture of power offered to us in the 1 Kings reading than we are with the pictures by which we are challenged in the Gospels. Jesus did not use his power to get rid of those who opposed him, and in fact he forgave his friends who let him down at the end and the religious powers who worked so hard to have him killed. On top of this, Jesus held up for all of us the example of faith he found most evident in the very folks of his day who were not expected to have faith: today's centurion, and also the woman who had been unclean for twelve years because of unstoppable bleeding. "Your faith has made you well...This man's faith is greater than any I've found in all of Israel."

Which leaves us with two important questions to ask ourselves: How are we using our power? And, What kind of faith is Jesus finding in us as we go through our days and years?

You are probably familiar with Soren Kierkegaard's challenging parable of the ducks. Kierkegaard describes a town where only ducks live. Every Sunday the ducks waddle out of their houses and waddle down Main Street to their church, They waddle into the sanctuary and squat in their proper pews. The duck choir waddles in and takes its place, then the duck minister comes forward and opens the duck Bible. (Ducks, like all other creatures on earth, seem to have their own special version of the Scriptures.) He reads to them: "Ducks! God has given you wings! With wings you can fly! With wings you can mount up and soar like eagles! No walls can confine you! No fences can hold you! You have wings. God has given you wings and you can fly like birds!" All the ducks shout, "Amen!" *And then they all waddle home.* (From Tony Campolo, *Let me Tell You A Story*).

Power, authority, faith. What are we missing? What keeps us from "flying"? Why do we trust our appliances and automobiles and bank accounts more than we trust our God? There should not be a contest between them; finally, there is no contest, for only God is God. Only God is worthy of our trust and our faith.

May each of us dare to let God's Holy Spirit touch our hearts and lead us through our lives, that Jesus may find in us astonishing and life-changing, perhaps even world-changing, faith! Amen.