

There is Another King: Jesus

Luke – Acts

The Power of Jesus' Word

Luke 7:1 – 10

Tufts ACF, January 29, 2004

Introduction: Power to Love

As we start this semester, I think it's appropriate that we first consider the power of Jesus. How is Jesus powerful? How is Jesus uniquely powerful? And what does that mean for us? What does it mean that Jesus is powerful when we feel weak? What does it mean that Jesus is powerful when we feel like we're flailing around? In talking about the power of Jesus, I want to begin by telling you a story.

Every Martin Luther King Jr. day, I try to read about Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement. One of the amazing things that I've found is how much the African-American Christians who made up bulk of the Civil Rights Movement loved those who hated them. The moments that stand out most perhaps are the marches from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. In the South in early 1965, particularly in Alabama, there had been weeks of violence and unrest. The racist Jim Crow laws, especially voter registration policies, segregated the South and deeply injured the black community. Dr. King, John Lewis, and other leaders helped organize these marches. It was a way to call national attention to the racist laws of Alabama that allowed only 2% of the black population to vote, even though they were 50% of the overall population. It was also a way for many people to pray together and translate their pain into something constructive. So in March of 1965, the marches got underway. About 525 went with John Lewis on the first march. Governor Wallace of Alabama and Sheriff Clark and his men met the marchers. The sheriff warned the people that they had two minutes to break up the march, but the deputies attacked sooner. They tear-gassed, clubbed, spat on, whipped, trampled by horses, and jeered the demonstrators. Television and newspapers carried pictures of the event that became known as "Bloody Sunday." And the whole nation watched on television as John Lewis and the marchers got down on their knees and prayed. They were bloodied, and yet throughout it all they said, 'No matter what you do to us, we will love you. We will overcome your hatred with love.'

Dr. King led the second march two weeks after that. They were taunted and jeered. Yet not a shot was fired in response. Not a stone was thrown in response. Not a window broken in response. Not a person abused or insulted. Like the first march, they got to Montgomery. The Montgomery County Mounted Posse waded into the marchers swinging batons. King delivered a speech and tried to deliver a petition for full voting rights to Gov. Wallace but troopers kept him out of the Capitol building. The governor's secretary came out and took it. Throughout it all he said, 'No matter what you do to us, we will love you. We will overcome your hatred with love.'

Loving people who hate you is not easy. In fact, loving people who are just annoying is not easy. It takes power. But where did the power come from? In a later book called *Strength to Love*, Dr. King writes, 'At the center of the Christian faith is the conviction that in the universe there is a God of power.' (*Strength to Love*, "Our God is Able") Notably, when people joined the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. King required them to meditate every day on the life and teachings of Jesus. Why? Because Jesus gives us that power.

Relevance to You

We all have a hard time with people who are difficult, ranging from the mildly annoying to those who injure you. Some of you may have a hard time with your parents. Or a sibling. Or that friend you mom always compared you to. Or that person you broke up with. Or those people you don't like working with. There are times when you feel weak, unable to change patterns of relationship, patterns of avoidance or anger in your own hearts. How is Jesus relevant to that?

Background: v.1

We're going to look at Luke 7:1 – 10, the story of Jesus healing the centurion's servant. It comes right after the first major block of Jesus' teaching that Luke offers. In 7:1, Luke says 'When he had completed

all his discourse.’ That discourse is called the Sermon on the Plain, where Jesus teaches us to love our enemy, overcome hatred with love, give until it hurts and drives us into poverty. You have to understand that that is the immediate backdrop. In many ways, the story of the centurion helps us understand how Jesus empowers us to live that way. After this teaching, Jesus goes to Capernaum, a city along the shores of the Sea of Galilee in Israel.

Who Has the Power Here? v.2 – 3

2 And a centurion’s slave, who was highly regarded by him [the centurion], was sick and about to die.

Here we have the main character in the story: the Roman centurion. In Israel, most Romans were hated. Back in that day, the Roman Empire dominated the Mediterranean world. Roman armies were stationed throughout Israel to keep them in line. They crucified people every once in a while to serve as public examples. They were in charge. This is a powerful man.

And he seems to have some clout. When this Roman centurion has a household servant who was sick and about to die, what does he do? He looks for Jesus, who had developed a reputation of healing people. Look at v.3: ‘When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders asking Him to come and save the life of his slave.’

Now at this point, why he does this is a guessing game to us. On the one hand, the Roman centurion could be nervous. Maybe he’s nervous that Jesus won’t come and do this favor. After all, Jesus is Jewish, and he is a Roman. Why would Jesus do a Roman a favor? Well, maybe that’s why he goes through the Jewish elders. Just in case they’ll have more pull with Jesus.

On the other hand, the centurion might be confident. After all, he has a lot of authority. He’s a military man in occupied territory, kind of like Colin Powell in Iraq. He has military force on his side. And maybe he thinks like a military officer. Look at his approach. He finds the highest ranking people in Capernaum, the Jewish elders, to meet Jesus (7:3). Jesus, as a younger man, might respond to the Jewish elders. There is a chain of command. And the centurion knows how to work the system.

So which is it? What’s surprising is that in both cases, whether he’s nervous or confident, the Roman centurion seems to think he’s the powerful one. If the Roman centurion has authority over the Jewish elders, and the Jewish elders have influence over Jesus, then who has the power here? Is Jesus’ power really that great? Mind you, at this point, this is what we could legitimately read in this text until v.3. Look at how the Roman centurion behaves. Jesus’ power really isn’t that great. In fact, you can just use him for your own ends. But is that true?

Who Can Make a Claim on Jesus? v.4 – 5

4 When they came to Jesus, they earnestly implored Him, saying, “He is worthy for You to grant this to him; 5 for he loves our nation and it was he who built us our synagogue.”

We’re in for a few surprises here. The first surprise is that the elders like the Roman centurion. They “earnestly entreated” Jesus, the passage says. Furthermore, they say, “He is worthy for you to grant this to him.” And then we find out why: “For he loves our nation, and it was he who built us our synagogue’ (7:4 – 5). So the Roman centurion helped build a Jewish synagogue. That’s a surprise. But maybe it’s to placate the people, kind of like a policy of tolerance. We’ll come back to that.

To their credit, the Jewish elders are also probably apprehensive about whether Jesus will respond to a Gentile, so they appeal to a common ground they think they share with Jesus. “He loves our nation and built our synagogue.” But does the centurion deserve Jesus’ power? Is this why the centurion stays at home? Why he sits back and sends other high ranking people? Is he a presumptuous strongman, showing off his power? Or is he a pious do-gooder, confident that he is ‘worthy’? Will Jesus be persuaded by this? Do we have to muscle our way to Jesus, showing off our power or our good deeds?

Right now, the impression we have of the centurion is that he views his world in terms of power relations like this:

1. Myself (& other Romans)
2. High ranking Jewish people
3. Jesus
4. Low ranking Jewish people
5. The God of Israel, beaten by the Roman gods Jupiter, etc.?

Right away we have to ask, “Is this okay with Jesus? Is this the attitude he wants? The worldview he wants?” We’ll come back to this.

Jesus Has the Power: v.6 – 7

Well surprisingly, Jesus responds. Look at v.6: “Now Jesus started on His way with them; and when He was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends.” Jesus starts on his way to the centurion’s house (7:6), but when Jesus is not far from the house, the centurion sends another delegation. This time, it’s of ‘friends.’ In Greco-Roman usage, ‘friends’ represent you best. These friends are probably also Roman. They present the centurion’s claim in the first person, speaking for him. They relay a very different message than the Jewish elders, saying that he is not ‘worthy’ at all! ‘Lord, do not trouble yourself further, for I am not worthy for you to come under my roof; for this reason I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you.’

The about-face between the first and second delegations is dramatic. With the second delegation, the centurion shows he is aware of the Jewish taboo: most Jews don’t enter a Gentile house. So he offers Jesus a way to avoid entering his house. He respects Jewish scruples.

Second, the centurion clarifies that he was not presumptuous. He stayed at home, not because he could get other people to do his legwork, but because he didn’t think of himself as worthy enough to come out to meet Jesus.

Third, the centurion shows that he expected to be misrepresented. The Jewish elders say, ‘He is worthy’ but his friends say twice, ‘I am not worthy.’ He knew how the Jewish elders would reason and appeal. He wanted to send them to honor Jesus, since you can’t send better people than the Jewish elders. But imagine that you’re the centurion. If the Jewish elders were to say, ‘He is worthy,’ then he would seem to be self-righteous. He would give the impression that he had some sort of claim of moral power on Jesus, and this he does not want to do. He appeals to Jesus’ mercy alone. ‘I am not worthy...but would you do this thing anyway?’

This second delegation changes everything we think about the centurion. In fact, it shows what a tough situation he was in. He wanted to ask Jesus to heal his beloved servant, but how? He’s not sure Jesus would show mercy to a Roman. He stayed at home, not because he wanted to show how a powerful man merely sends messengers, but because, as he says, ‘I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you.’ The elders seem like a good option because they are Jewish, yet because they are Jewish and he is a Roman centurion, he risks sending the wrong message, as if he were saying, ‘I am in charge; I am in charge of the Jewish elders, and of you, too.’ He doesn’t want to send that message. So he sends his closest friends to represent him, essentially saying that Jesus has all the power in this situation. He has none.

This is a complete reversal of what anyone would have expected from the centurion. Far from taking a position of power, the centurion goes out of his way to honor Jesus’ power. It would be as if the Joint Chiefs of Staff all bowed before Jesus from a distance, saying they were not worthy to come close to him.

Jesus’ Power is God’s Power: v.7b – 8

In fact, the Roman centurion shows more understanding of Jesus and Jesus’ power than anyone. In v.7b – 8 he says, ‘But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I, too, am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come!’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this!’ and he does it.’ The centurion’s background in military service gives him a helpful lens through which he sees Jesus’ power. In fact, you can say that for the centurion, as for Jesus, power is shown in verbal commands. Jesus just needs to speak for something to happen. He does not need to be

physically present to heal the centurion's servant. Jesus doesn't need to touch his the sick slave. Jesus doesn't even need to be in the same house. No one else has understood this about Jesus yet.

Furthermore, the Roman centurion recognizes where Jesus' power comes from. How does he do that? He recognizes that Jesus is under authority. The centurion says in v.8, 'I, too, am a man under authority.' The centurion recognizes that Jesus is under authority just as he (the centurion) is also under authority. That's what gives Jesus his power: that he is under authority. Under whose authority? God's. By recognizing Jesus' authority, the centurion is also recognizing the authority of the God of Israel who has given His power to Jesus. In essence, this Roman has been sincerely respectful of the God of Israel. His building the synagogue in Capernaum in the past was not a political move. It was a gesture of real respect. And now he recognizes the power of God in and through Jesus.

And the centurion understands what Jesus' power means for us. In the military, when an officer gives a command, his authority is imparted to the subordinate. The subordinate is not just placed under obligation to do the task, although that's a part of it. But the subordinate is given the authority to do the task. The subordinate can go get whatever he or she needs to carry it out. The centurion understands that power, when obeyed, is imparted all the way down the chain. The centurion's statement suggests that when Jesus issues a command, those whom he commands are not merely placed under obligation to carry out the command; they are given the power to do so. This is a revolutionary insight. Only say the word, because your word contains your power. Your word expresses your power.

It becomes clear that the Roman centurion's view of the world is like this:

1. God of Israel
2. Jesus
3. Jewish community
4. Himself

He places himself under the authority of Jesus. And then he acknowledges that Jesus has authority and power from God. In Genesis 1, God created life by a word. Here, Jesus restores life by a word. Could Jesus be God?

In v.9 – 10, Jesus praises the centurion. "Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled at him, and turned and said to the crowd that was following Him, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith. 10 When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health."

Amazing! What if you had a younger cousin that you really loved? What if this cousin got sick? What if you knew Jesus was passing through your hometown? What would you do? I know what I would do. I would go out personally, beg Jesus to come to my cousin's house. And then go with Jesus to make sure he got there. And then I'd stay right there until Jesus did the miracle. In essence, I am always tempted to have a low view of Jesus' power, and have a small amount of faith. But here is a high view of Jesus' power. It is the power of a king who need only say, 'Let it be,' and it is authorized. It is the power of God, who need only say, 'Let it be,' and it is done. That's the right way to understand Jesus' power. And that's the right way to approach Jesus. So Jesus says this is great faith.

This contrast in worldviews is central. The key here is that you say, "I'm no longer making myself first. God is first, and the way He expresses Himself and His power is through Jesus. So I am under Jesus."

Loving Your Enemy

Now we can understand why this story comes after Jesus' teaching on loving your enemy, giving sacrificially, in Luke 6. Let me remind you that placement is important. We think about the implications of loving our enemy and say, "Man, that's really hard. I don't have the power to love. I don't have the strength to love." But if the centurion had heard Jesus' teaching, he would have said, "Okay. If Jesus speaks with God's authority, and if he is giving these commands, then I have to really do it. But not only that, he must also give his people the power to carry out those commands. Jesus' power is therefore not just to command, but to empower. Jesus is not only an authority, he authorizes. 'Only say the word.'

This is one way Jesus is unique. There have been many moral teachers: Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, and others. But while some of them had worthwhile things to say, none of them could empower people through their teaching.

That's important because we need empowerment. During the summer of '93, my parents' fighting reached a new level. They had given up on their 5-6 year period of trying to work things out. My dad's drinking escalated. There was some physical abuse at home. My typical response to my family's problems ever since I got my drivers' license was to drive away. I would go to my friends' houses to be distracted. Or I would go do something. For the first time, I said, "Lord Jesus, if your power is real, I need you to make it real in me." And he did. He made a huge change in me. Jesus enabled me to stay home. By itself, that was a miracle. I understood what my sister was going through and was able to counsel her through some of it because I understood myself better, too. It was as if a new emotional and personal awareness had suddenly opened up. I understood my parents as people for the first time. I suddenly understood their issues. I was able to let them make their own decision rather than say that they had to do this or that because of me. When they decided to get a divorce, they wanted to divide up all their things, but didn't want to pay for a lawyer, so they had me arbitrate it. I did, and was calm the whole time. I would stay up really late talking to each of my parents and how this was affecting them. I was telling an old high school friend about this and he said to me, "Mako, how can you be so other-centered at a time like this?" That statement serves as a reminder to me of what Jesus can do in and through me. It gives me confidence to raise my family in the inner city right now.

I hope it becomes a reminder for you of what Jesus can do in and through you, if you let him. On the personal level, if there is someone you don't have the strength to love, let Jesus empower you. He will do something amazing. Just watch. If you're a Christian, think about at least one person that you have difficulty reaching out to: a person who needs to know Jesus, but for whatever reason, you get annoyed or hurt by this person. Let Jesus' word, his power, come into you and empower you to do what you couldn't do on your own. And for all of you, if you were to reflect regularly on the life and teachings of Jesus, I wonder what would happen?

I can list countless people who have found Jesus to give them a power to carry out his teaching. They are marginalized in secular history, but if you read carefully, you'll find them. For instance, centuries ago, St. Francis of Assisi walked into Muslim armies to share Jesus with them. In the 1700's, a group of German Christians (the Moravians) sold themselves into slavery to share Jesus with African slaves headed for the Caribbean. In his book, *Strength to Love*, King writes about coming to Montgomery to lead the bus boycott. Right after the protest, King and his wife got all kinds of phone calls and letters threatening their lives. After one such phone call, King says, "I hung up, but I could not sleep. It seemed that all of my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point. I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally, I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing to be a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had almost gone, I determined to take my problem to [Jesus]. My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud, "...The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left..." At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced him. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever." ...Three nights later, our home was bombed. Strangely enough, I accepted the word of the bombing calmly. My experienced with [Jesus] had given me a new strength and trust. I knew now that [Jesus] is able to give us the interior resources to face the storms and problems of this life."

Luke 7:1 – 10

Lk.7:1 When he had completed all his discourse in the hearing of the people, he went to Capernaum. ² And a centurion's slave, who was highly regarded by him, was sick and about to die. ³ When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders asking him to come and save the life of his slave. ⁴ When they came to Jesus, they earnestly implored him, saying, "He is worthy for you to grant this to him; ⁵ for he loves our nation and it was he who built us our synagogue." ⁶ Now Jesus started on his way with them; and when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself further, for I am not worthy for you to come under my roof; ⁷ for this reason I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁸ For I also am a man placed under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes, and to another, 'Come!' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it." ⁹ Now when Jesus heard this, he marveled at him, and turned and said to the crowd that was following him, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith. ¹⁰ When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

The Roman Centurion's Beliefs: Our First Impression

1. Myself (& other Romans)
2. High ranking Jewish people
3. Jesus
4. Low ranking Jewish people
5. The God of Israel, beaten by the Roman gods Jupiter, etc.

The Roman Centurion's Beliefs: The Reality

1. God of Israel
2. Jesus
3. Jewish community
4. Himself