

Under Authority
Rev. James Van Schaick
Pound Ridge Community Church
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
February 24, 2019
Luke 7:1-10

I don't have a great many pictures of me with famous, or even semi-famous people. But I brought one of them to share with you today. It's a picture of a much younger Pastor Jim with the majority leader of the New York State Senate, Dean Skelos. I was not friendly with Skelos, who was from our neighboring town of Rockville Centre in Long Island, but I did know him. After 30 years in the senate, Skelos is no longer around, and if you don't remember why, let me remind you. Last year he was sentenced to 3 years in prison for using his influence to arrange high-paying, and mostly no-show, jobs for his son, Adam, at companies who did business with the state.

At one time, Skelos was one of the three most powerful people in Albany, along with Governor Andrew Cuomo, and State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver. In 2018, Silver was also convicted of corruption, sentenced to 7 years in prison, and ordered to repay about \$5 million dollars in ill-gotten gains.

Of course, abusing positions of authority is not restricted to New York State, nor to government. Corporate scandals have also filled the news over the past few years. But it's also not always about money. Most of you know that the Catholic Church has just concluded a high-level meeting at the Vatican to determine how the church should be responding to the victims of sexual abuse by its clergy, but more importantly, how to restore trust in the church going forward.

Sometimes, misusing authority is just about power for its own sake. I could offer many examples, but I won't. But I will say that I do not recall a period in American government where it was so commonplace for elected, and unelected, officials to try to use the power of government against people they disagree with, in ways legal, and often not-so-legal.

Of course, we didn't invent this. In fact, if we want to, we can go back two thousand years for evidence of abuse by people with authority. Let's take the Bible, for example. You all remember how the Pharisees used to rail about how Jesus spent his time with the outcasts of society, "sinners, prostitutes, and tax collectors." And you may have wondered how tax collectors got into that august group. In those days the local tax collectors, the former-day IRS, would routinely use the collection authority the Romans gave them to charge more than the legal taxes, and keep the extra for themselves.

Of course, even if the tax collectors were honest (and there must have been some), they were still hated merely because they were agents of the abusive authority of Rome. In that time, even the legal levels of Roman taxation were crushing. The Roman occupiers also controlled the population with physical cruelty and oppressive laws. Being a high level Roman in an occupied province meant almost limitless ability to expand your personal power and grow your wealth at the expense of the local population. And most Romans took advantage of the opportunity.

In that context, we can see that in today's gospel lesson Luke introduces us to a truly unusual man. He was a Roman centurion. In that time a centurion was a leader with 100 soldiers to do his bidding. He also would have been an experienced commander, someone who knew how the game was played and won. A centurion was an extremely powerful man, by anyone's standards. Yet this particular centurion is not a man to abuse his power. He has forged a close relationship with the local Jewish people, who apparently think very highly of him, and he has been a benefactor of their synagogue. We don't know too much about this centurion, or exactly what it is that has caused him to develop a faith in God – to see himself as answering to an authority outside the world's power structures. But Luke does tell us a great deal about how this has manifested in his life.

He is a man of compassion, who cared about the members of his household, even the servants. In your pew translations it says that the servant was "valued highly." Because of a translation like that you can read in some commentaries that the centurion was primarily concerned about losing a valuable piece of property. But the words actually mean the servant was esteemed, or precious, to him. I think it is far more consistent with the picture that Luke gives us of this centurion to believe that he genuinely loved his servant, and wished him to be well for his own sake.

This centurion was also a generous man. The Jewish elders who come to Jesus on his behalf tell Jesus that he has given money to the synagogue. In fact, we can surmise that he has been an exceedingly generous contributor, for what the elders actually tell Jesus is that the centurion "built our synagogue." It would be unusual enough for someone outside the faith to be so great a contributor. It is all the more unusual that someone whose power and authority could easily be used to build his own wealth at the expense of the Jewish community would actually be supporting it financially.

The centurion was humble. As powerful a man as he was might easily have had Jesus brought to him and demanded that Jesus heal his servant. He has faith that Jesus can do this. But he seems to count himself unworthy even to seek Jesus out himself, let alone to ask Jesus to come into his home. He does not ask for Jesus' help based on his own, significant, power and authority. He asks based on his own simple trust in the transcendent authority that rests in Jesus.

Some of you here today are people in authority – by virtue of roles you fill in secular businesses and organizations, or degrees you may hold, or special expertise you may have. But we seem to live in a time where you need no special claim to have authority. Today, we label as “intolerant and biased” anyone who believes that any person or way of thinking might be more authoritative than any another. We tend to leave to the individual the authority to decide what is right and what is wrong. This is a dangerous place for us to be in as a society and as a nation – a place that will only lead to more betrayal of trust by public officials and more officials abusing the power of government to “get” people they don’t like. What the centurion understood was that for all the worldly authority we can invent for ourselves, our lives still need real authority. We need authority from beyond ourselves, greater than ourselves, to test and judge the content of our actions.

To me, the most extraordinary thing about this story is the unexpected relationships that have formed around this act of making the centurion’s slave well. Think about the cast of characters Luke has brought together. We have a Roman, someone who would normally view the Jews as objects who are there to be subjugated and exploited. We have the Jewish elders, who would fear and hate the Roman in return. We have Jesus, who would have been viewed by most Romans as a travelling preacher of no consequence (if they’d even heard of him), and as a charlatan and a blasphemer by the Jews.

In this story, even Jesus came into this with something of a bias. Jesus says many times that his mission is to the lost sheep of Israel, not to gentiles. And this centurion, whom Jesus agrees to help, was the consummate gentile – not merely a non-Jew, but the representative of a nation that is cruelly oppressing Jesus’ people.

So, what really happens in Luke’s story is that this group of very strange bedfellows – of people who all have reasons to suspect and avoid each other – break down the social barriers of the day. Together they form a small community of trust and respect. And the result of their unlikely reconciliation is healing, and new life. What Luke has really given us here today is a mini-parable about what the Kingdom of God is like, and how we can get there.

And what’s interesting is that this small outbreak of God’s Kingdom amid the political and religious tension of the time has its beginning in the actions of one man – one man with great authority by the world’s standards, who understood where real authority comes from. What set it in motion was one man who did not take advantage of his own authority, but accepted God’s -- with compassion, generosity, and humility – and with a simple trust.