

A Commanding Presence

Luke 7:1-10

As people around this country gather in village cemeteries and town squares this weekend, they will pay homage to those who have served in the military and, in particular, to those who have lost their lives in times of war. Our nation, of any country on earth, actually has a generational legacy of war surpassed by no other, in both the number of conflicts we've been embroiled and the global range of our military enterprises. Since 1776, there have been only 21 years the U.S. has not been at war, either domestically or internationally—a startling 93% of the time since George Washington took office!¹

So on this weekend, there are many dead to remember and to honor, as there are also many victims scattered across the fruited plain or around the world who died at the hands of American military action and weaponry. The wartime remembrance of the dead is both a noble exercise and a scandalous reckoning that characterizes much of our national legacy.

With that in mind, what often goes unmentioned in any discussion of wars and their memorials is the remarkable fact that most of those who lie buried in soldiers' graves had as their last act on earth—the final deed of their lives—a duty-bound obedience to following someone else's orders. They died fulfilling the command of a superior officer, without a word of their own to mitigate the decision.

It's accepted without question that most men and women who lost their lives fighting our nation's battles did not choose to die at their destined moment, or in that particular setting—in all likelihood, wishing, as we all do, to have our last breaths on earth to be at an elder age, surrounded

¹List compiled by varying sources, summarized at www.washingtonsblog.com

by close family in a warm, familial setting where the light of one's life would be slowly extinguished to darkness, rather than snuffed out in a combat zone in the midst of one's youth. Those who are remembered and mourned may have died heroes to a grateful nation, but not likely by their own volition or choice. They died following the command and will of those who ordered them to battle on their fateful day.

Few people on this planet understand a command structure better than those who serve in the military. In fact, there are few places apart from the military culture where the structure itself refutes the inalienable belief that each of us have a God-given right to express free will. God may grant that to humankind, but a military structure cannot. Such an authoritarian system is in place, not to impose tyranny, but in order to protect this highly-disciplined institution from the crimes and chaos of anarchy.

The authority structure is designed to ensure solidarity up and down the ranks—a uniform agreement as to purpose and intent, even if there are disparities in tactics and disagreements in opinion. It's the preeminent depiction of "everyone being on the same page," especially important in times of conflict when lives are on the line. The command structure is intended for the protection of the combatants themselves, as it is to maintain a cohesive strategy and an effective execution of the battle plan. Without the discipline of a command structure, disorder would take over, particularly when survival instincts gain the upper hand. A command structure imposes its control over each and every participant to prevent the individual will of soldiers from undermining the safety of others or the success of the campaign.

Intentionally, this is set up in hierarchical fashion—leaders at every tier of authority, with responsibility and command over those under them and due respect and obedience to those who serve above. There are rules and protocols in place that everyone is required to buy into and penalties to pay when they don't.

In many respects, this hierarchical structure lies in stark contrast to civilian life and society; the military maintains individual subservience to the collective whole, where diversity is homogenized into uniformity, where personal freedom is held strictly in check, and where obedience to authority is demanded without excuse or explanation. One can argue the pros and cons of where the rules of civil society should be, but in the military culture, the individual prerogatives of soldiers are limited to the smallest of discretion. As a result, with a training environment so foreign to how much of the civilian world works, it takes a special person to fit well into the military culture.

Sometimes, as a nonmilitary person, it's hard for me to understand how it works so well. Where else does one simply obey orders without having a license to question them or offer input? How can one implicitly trust authorities, without having an opportunity to determine if they are worthy of your obedience?

How crazy it must be, especially at the supreme levels of our government, where every President receives utmost respect for his role as the Commander in Chief of the military, all the while attaining the Oval Office in a political system where everything he does is questioned by the media, criticized by the public, and resisted by the opposition! Talk about a tale of two cities! It doesn't surprise me that virtually everyone who has served in that office garners deep respect and appreciation for the military.

It's the one institution where the President's word is received and followed without all of the baggage that politics brings. What political leader wouldn't want to be surrounded by those who respond obediently to one's will and command, not to mention providing the protective security for the institutions of government? Apart from such a hierarchical structure in place, a commanding presence is virtually impossible to maintain.

Now my intent is not to merely reflect on the military culture. Grasping the nature of a command structure is helpful for understanding today's text from Luke 7. In fact, I would say it's crucial for making sense of the narrative, which has its parallel telling in Matthew 8. It's true that the story is largely about Jesus' power to heal and restore the life of the centurion's servant, not unlike what he did in other instances, such as with Jairus' daughter or the widow's son in the story which immediately follows this one in Luke. What makes this one different is in how Jesus heals, i.e., simply through his word and not by being physically present. This is one of the few instances in the gospels where Jesus heals a person by word and not by touch. It happens in this way based on the centurion's statement, which serves as a foil for the gospel writer:

For I also 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 slave, "Do this," and the slave does it.

The point is, just as the centurion lived within a command structure and his word is obeyed by his underlings, so too Jesus was in one where he obeyed God and had authority over the evil spirits and powers that harm human beings.

This may sound quaint to the modern mind, but in the ancient worldview, there was believed to be a hierarchy of powers,² where every effect in life was caused by some authority higher on the pecking order impacting a lower realm. Illness, for instance, was caused by spirits or demons that existed in the realm immediately above humankind and the lower subhuman order of animals. Above humans were the angels and impure spirits (Gk., demons); next on the hierarchy were the archangels, sons of God, and other gods worshipped around the world. At the top, the supreme authority was the Most High God—in Judaism, that would be YHWH, revealed to Moses (for Romans, it would be Jupiter; for Greeks, Zeus; for Egyptians, Ra; etc.). This provided the command structure for human civilization, in a manner of speaking.

The centurion, who operated within a military command structure (and, we're told, had an appreciation and affinity for Judaic beliefs, enough to fund the building of the local synagogue in Capernaum) clearly perceived through Jesus' reputation that he was higher than a normal human being in the Jewish spiritual order, since he possessed the power to heal humans and exorcise demons. The only ones who could do that were on the level of archangels, some other god, or, as it were, sons of God. This is why Jesus was referred to as "son of God" and why, when his rivals took issue with his authority to forgive sins, Jesus would counter it through the power of healing or exorcising a suffering individual to prove his position of authority. It was entirely based on the command structure of the spiritual order. That's where he was on the hierarchy of powers. Those on a lower realm on the hierarchy had no choice but to obey those on a higher level. If

² Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, Third Edition, WJK Press, 2001, pp.104-105.

Jesus' word, as a son of God, was being disobeyed, it was in effect disobeying the supreme power of the Most High God. Instructions, teachings, and wisdom were to be obeyed if you were on a lower plane of existence. It wasn't a matter of debate: Jesus' ability to heal people and exorcise demons was proof positive of his spiritual status and authority, which is the primary reason the gospels are filled with such accounts. Without such a demonstration of power, he would have been viewed merely as human.

What's interesting for us is that, in the modern age, we didn't inherit such a belief, at least not to the degree that it's universally held. So what happens is we compartmentalize and dis-integrate all these aspects to Jesus' ministry, leaving us with different impressions of who he was and build our theologies around each characteristic. Jesus was a healer of people, so some are focused on his ability to heal (without sensing that this was an expression of his place on the hierarchy). Jesus forgave sins, so some emphasize the forgiveness of sins above all else (again, power granted to a higher status on the command structure). Jesus was called the Son of God, so some are convinced that Jesus is the only way to God (instead of sensing it as a description of the second tier of authority). Jesus was a teacher, so some focus only on his teachings in their spiritual life (without recognizing the imperative nature of his word due to his authority).

What is missed is that all of these aspects are related to the others demonstrating Jesus' spiritual authority in the ancient world. His was a commanding presence in the Jewish spiritual order. He represented the realm below the Most High God—the realm of the sons of God, the archangels, and the other gods of the world—known and unknown—demonstrated mainly, if not exclusively, through his power to heal and

drive away evil spirits and to forgive human sins. Only those in the realm of the sons of God could do this. Because of his status in this command structure, what he said was true and what he taught was to be obeyed. His place on the spiritual order of authority required this. It was not an option, or something to debate. One acted obediently to the commanding presence of a son of God.

Obviously, without a belief in this ancient hierarchy of spiritual powers and, in all likelihood, without a deep appreciation of or experience with a command structure, it's a real challenge for us to interpret the stories of Jesus accurately, at least in the way they would have been received and understood two thousand years ago. Without those points of reference, much of what he did and taught won't resonate with as much meaning as it would have for original hearers; likewise, the sense of following him, of respecting his word and authority, of obeying his teachings is greatly diminished.

In the ancient worldview, Jesus is portrayed in the gospels with a commanding presence, one that would be recognized in his extraordinary powers and in his ability to forgive sins. For us, without that worldview, he is largely perceived to be a wise sage, or a personal savior, or a social prophet, or a compassionate healer, or even as the unique and only Son of God—a human with divine attributes, or a deity with human ones. The truth is, he is all of those things and yet, at the same time, none of those things, simply because, without an ancient worldview, we don't really know who he is or was, since all of those descriptors are interrelated and based on a first-century paradigm of spiritual power.

Frankly, this is hard for us to grasp given our cultural cues. In our individualized approach to faith rooted in a freedom of conscience, in a

modern democratic society committed to equality and overcoming social injustices and hierarchies of all types, in a pluralistic world that is quickly expanding beyond a dominant, if not universal, religious paradigm, we are a long way from the world Jesus knew and the one which first knew him.

But imagine for a moment, had we remained within that classic paradigm of the ancient world, as one from the realm of the sons of God, Jesus' word would have been received as absolutely authoritative, respected by necessity and effect—not just by choice, whim, or desire. His spiritual status and powers would have demanded this. If so, the world would have obeyed his commanding presence and word and, had that occurred, it would look so much different to us now than it presently does.

For one thing, we would not have enemies because we are commanded to love them, nor would we worry about our life; everyone would live by the Golden Rule, all people would share their resources so no one would be without, and the legacy of humankind would be one of justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with the Most High God. It would be a realm of God ordered in its intended way. Imagine that!

And in a world like that, should it have been made real, then instead of wartime memories that account for those who died for noble and ignoble reasons on the world's battlefields, the only reflections we would generate on such a weekend as this are how good, how merciful, and how abundant and generous this life has been for all people everywhere.

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