

# Sermon

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May 28, 2016 | The 2nd Sunday after Pentecost  
Text: Luke 7:1-10 | Preacher: Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows

Because the New York Times is covering Chicago gun violence in a video series promoted on social media all weekend long and because the Sun-Times has posted a live shooting tracker for Chicago all through the holiday weekend –I’m wearing orange.

The Wear Orange website has a social media tool that allows you to upload your photo with the hash tag, “I wear Orange for \_\_\_\_”. At first, I thought it was a memorial of some kind—a way to remember those who had died because of gun violence. But my first inclination was to think of the living. I wear orange for Tarianna Williams, the CROSSwalk to Work intern who is now considering a career in early childhood education because of her internship at the Erikson Institute. I wear orange for Charly Sandoval—the two-time CROSSwalk to work intern who was able to purchase his first real winter coat two years ago because of the money he earned that summer. And oh, he was able to avoid the bullets flying through this neighborhood too. I wear orange for this community—mindful of how close gun violence is to this very sanctuary.

Here I stand wearing orange because this Thursday is Wear Orange Day—an opportunity for people to show their support of ending gun violence. I had to wear orange because the person who inspired, Hidaya Pendleton—a young teen, killed one mile north of here just one week after performing at President Obama’s second inauguration, is a local icon for us of the insidious and pervasive nature of gun violence. And like all good ideas like this, the Wear Orange campaign is designed to ignite conversation that leads to advocacy, and inspire action that leads to transformative change. Why orange?

According to the website—the color orange symbolizes the value of human life. Hunters wear orange in the woods to protect themselves and others. And in 2013, Hidaya’s friends asked classmates to honor her by wearing orange. And now, across the nation orange is becoming the symbol of gun

safety. Not gun control, gun safety. We can parse the hunter reference on an anti-gun violence website at another time.

We all know that it is going to take more than an orange t-shirt, or orange stoles as some clergy will be sporting next Sunday, to make the streets safer from gun violence and our schools and public spaces safer from mass shooting incidents. We know that it will take some of the interventions that are well known here—feeding the hungry, pouring our resources of time, relationships and money into our public schools, and giving access to quality job training and mentoring that comes with meaningful wages. But in our incredibly polarized world perhaps the color orange can remind us that we are meant for something different and I can’t help but believe that the Centurion in our gospel lesson has something to tell us.

If the mission of the church—our church—is to be reconciled with God and one another in Christ, then we need to find common ground. And we have to believe common ground is possible. We need to believe that deviation from the usual scripts that govern liberal and conservative divides on the social issues of the day is actually possible. And we have to believe that hearts can be changed—our own *and* those of others. That is the very notion that is at the heart of today’s gospel lesson.

But let’s start with a little context for the story commonly known as the healing of the centurion’s slave. We can begin with a reminder that Jesus has this encounter immediately after giving his sermon on the plain—Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount. That Jesus gives his sermon in the flats, is Luke’s subtle reminder that Jesus desires a flattened hierarchy—he’s literally down with the people.

The healing of the centurion’s slave is one that commends faith from an unexpected source. We have a Roman centurion who treats his slave— more like a human being

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than a piece of property. That's the first surprise. Now this is a bit of qualified surprise—we don't know the slave's name and he isn't released from his bondage. But the centurion does more than is expected. When the slave gets sick and is close to death, he implores the Jewish community to help him find a healer.

Jews and Romans were not on the best of terms. Roman occupiers were in the same camp as tax collectors—worse, actually. But this Roman centurion—we never find out his name—has a good relationship with the Jews there—he's even built a synagogue for them. So they are happy to help. And the help he desires is from Jesus. The stories of his healing power would have no doubt made their way to Capernaum so the Centurion asks the Jewish elders to ask Jesus to come and heal his slave.

And they do just that, saying to Jesus, "The centurion is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people." This, too, is interesting because we know that Jesus and the Jewish elders—scribes and such—didn't always see eye to eye.

But here's where it gets really interesting—When Jesus is on the way to the centurion's house, he encounters some of the centurion's friends who convey a message from the centurion—basically saying, I'm not worthy—do not come, but if you would just speak the word, my servant will be healed. And it is in recognizing that he understands what it means to be under authority and that he recognizes that Jesus has authority to heal, that Jesus is amazed. Usually, other people are amazed at Jesus—at his ability to heal, at his erudition in preaching, at his casting out of demons and such. Amaze—which means to surprise, confuse, or fill with wonder.

But in this instance, Jesus is amazed at the incredible faith the centurion has in Jesus' power to heal. Heal—not with a touch, but with a word. And I suspect that Jesus was also

amazed at the centurion's humility—how he doesn't use his position as a commander of some 100 men (hence the title centurion) in this case, to "lord over others" but instead sets it aside for someone else's benefit. Perhaps Jesus was amazed because this is just the kind of upside down, inside out, living and leadership he'd been preaching about all along. We've seen this before with the Samaritan called good found just a few chapters after this story. And now it is the centurion—surprising though it may be, who gets it.

Only say the word and my servant will be healed—and without saying a word of healing or a prayer of any kind, the servant is healed.

This is a story of disruption—disruption of the usual order of things, disruption of the usual narrative. Jim Friedrich says, "this is a story about a world which is repeatedly and radically disrupted: social and cultural barriers are crossed, enemies act like friends, the master/slave hierarchy is upended, earthly power humbles itself, the religious experts are schooled by a pagan outsider and oh, by the way, a healing miracle happens without any fanfare or even the slightest tangible demonstration of cause and effect."

The players and the story of gun violence in our country need radical disrupters on all sides. We need more police officers with humility of vocation, which can see the humanity in the armed 14 year-old black teenager. We need disrupters to cross social and cultural barriers—to inhabit one another's space so that we really know one another. We need members of the NRA and the gun lobby to come to table and listen deeply. We need to upend the master/slave hierarchy that is still very much at play in our society. We church folks need to listen and understand what might be learned from those outside the church.

And we need to acknowledge that actually, Jesus is speaking a word to us and this world and that quiet healings are

happening each and every day to people we can name like Charly and Tarianna. And as the latest news tallies of the dead and wounded on our streets roll in should we mourn? Yes. Should we be outraged? Of course. Should we be provoked to action? Absolutely.

And finally, we would be helped most of all, if we had the faith of a centurion. The faith that invites Jesus, the one who we may not meet in the flesh, to heal those of us—all of us—who are enslaved to the status quo. We must, like Jesus, be willing to go to the home of the so-called enemy. We must be willing to be amazed by the unexpected, by the outsider, by the one least likely to fill us with wonder. Who is your centurion? Wear orange for them too.