

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on May 29, 2016 (Proper 4, Year C)

The interaction between Jesus and the centurion in this morning's reading from Luke is *amazing*. And I'm not just saying that.

There are only two recorded instances of Jesus expressing amazement in the gospels. The first one is found in Mark. Jesus had returned to his hometown of Nazareth, where he didn't exactly get the hometown hero's welcome, and we hear that "he was *amazed* at their unbelief."

We get the second instance of amazement this morning as the centurion has second thoughts about sending for Jesus and asks a second delegation to tell Jesus not to bother. "Only speak the word and let my servant be healed," he says. And Luke writes that "when Jesus heard this, he was *amazed* at the centurion, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.'"

These are two very different types of amazement. It's like the difference between me telling a friend that the concert I went to last week was amazing! And that the church meeting I went to last week was amazing...

But the only *positive* expression of Jesus' amazement does make you wonder what exactly made this interaction so amazing. Certainly it was an unusual and highly unlikely exchange; an interaction that, on the surface of things, never should have taken place.

This centurion was a soldier, a Gentile, a member of the Roman occupying force. In other words, he was an enemy of the Jewish people; part of the oppressive regime that kept them in line, taxed them heavily, and insured allegiance to the emperor. There was no love lost between the typical Roman soldier and the typical Jew. The Roman army's mission was to stamp out any seeds of dissent and nip even the whiff of possible rebellion in the bud, while the Jewish people dreamed of one day removing the yoke of oppression and regaining their religious and political freedom.

But there was clearly something different about the centurion we meet in this story. In a world of command and control and might makes right we see something in his character that didn't fit the stereotype. First of all, he had concern for the health of one of his slaves. Most slaves were considered expendable; you certainly wouldn't find an officer going to any lengths to save the life of a slave. So we see a mark of compassion here.

The centurion asks for Jesus' help by sending some Jewish elders as messengers to Jesus. They ask Jesus to come and they basically give the centurion a character witness. "Not only does he love our people but he built our synagogue." In other words, we've known him for a long time and even though he's supposed to be our enemy he's worthy of your attention. So we see a mark of faith.

I wouldn't be surprised if people on both sides of the fence saw the relationship between the centurion and these Jewish elders as fraternizing with the enemy. It certainly raised eyebrows. The soldiers were

clear about their allegiance — it was to the Roman emperor, not some obscure Jewish holy man. And the Jewish people were suspicious of anyone associated with the Roman occupying force.

So the first thing that's amazing about this interaction is simply that there was any interaction at all. In asking Jesus for help, the centurion crosses all racial, social, religious, and ethnic barriers. And that's usually Jesus' job — he's the one who's always shocking people by eating with the "wrong" people and healing on the "wrong" day and interacting with outsiders in the "wrong" way. Jesus is the one who shatters cultural norms around gender and ethnicity and social class, tangibly demonstrating to his disciples the all-encompassing power of God's love. While making a lot of enemies in the process.

And yet here is a Roman soldier — an enemy, an outsider — incorporating one of Jesus' most radical teachings. One that the disciples themselves struggled with: "love your enemy as yourself." And this is demonstrated in real life, not by one of the disciples or one of Jesus' own people but by a Roman soldier who should be oppressing rather than seeking out the enemy.

So as much as Jesus was amazed at the hardness of heart and lack of faith displayed by the people in his own hometown, he is *even more* amazed at the openness of heart and the genuine faith displayed by such an unlikely source.

And perhaps he was simply amazed that someone got it. That someone — especially someone you would never expect — received his message and sought to live into it. That this soldier allowed Jesus' message of love to break through the formidable lines of the Roman army and to break through the armor surrounding a soldier's heart.

It goes to show that inspiration can come from the most unlikely places. That all of our preconceived notions are just that — preconceived, if not ill-conceived. And we see that no one is outside the purview of God's amazing grace. Even those who, by all accounts, should be enemies rather than adherents.

You know, I'm aware that we're hearing a story about a military leader on Memorial Day Weekend. Even though the Church doesn't recognize this day on the official calendar, it seems somehow fitting. On a day we remember and pray for those who died serving our country, we also recognize that military service can stand in tension with Christian service — as someone who has served in both contexts, I feel comfortable naming this. There's a reason many early Christians were arrested or killed for refusing to serve in the Roman army.

Military leaders are taught to both take orders — from those above them in the chain of command and to take the initiative — to use their judgment when the situation warrants it. Sometimes the acts of obeying orders and seizing the initiative act in tension. This story shows that in the life of faith we take orders — or if that word makes you uncomfortable — we listen to God and we also take the initiative by participating in God's work. Life is a mix of contemplation and action. If we only sat around listening, we'd never get anywhere and if we only acted, we'd often do the wrong thing.

This is what I find amazing about the centurion in this story. He is both a person of faith and someone who understands his context. Our life choices aren't always black and white. But when it comes to serving God we are invited, along with the centurion, to do so with all our heart and mind and soul. And with God's help, we can do some pretty amazing things in the process.