

A Man Under Authority

Hebrews 11:32-12:9

One of my favorite stories about Jesus is from the eighth chapter of Matthew's gospel, where a Roman centurion, a captain in the Roman army, approaches Jesus and begs him to heal his servant who lay at home stricken by some illness or injury that had rendered him paralyzed. The servant must have been dearly loved to propel a Roman officer out into the countryside looking for an itinerant, peasant Jewish faith healer. But out he came, willing to beg Jesus to save his servant's life and health.

And we know that Jesus immediately offered to follow the Roman home and heal the foreigner's slave. So both men acted over and against all conventions about how Jews and Romans should behave with each other. And it is at that point that their relationship complicated even further. The centurion declines to have Jesus come, not because he doesn't want a Jew in his house but because he understands something about Jesus that most people are blind to even to this day.

"There's no need for you to come." the centurion says to Jesus in so many words, *"For I myself, I too, am a man under authority...only say the word and my servant will be healed."* So this soldier looked at Jesus and recognized that he was dealing with someone like himself, a man under orders whose mission didn't require the pageantry of a home visit and drama of a visible healing in front of a crowd to get the job done. *"Just give the order and my servant will be healed."*, the centurion told Christ.

In our passage from Hebrews this morning, the Apostle challenges us to do exactly what the centurion was able to do that day, get a good look at Jesus and draw the necessary conclusions about where life will lead us from there. He had been telling us the story of faithful Old Testament saints, who both accomplished wonderful things for God, but then also had all too often had to suffer terrible things to see the promise of faith passed down through all those generations before the coming of Christ.

The point being that Moses and David and Elijah and all the rest were under orders, on a mission to make sure that, when God was ready to send a Savior, there would be people ready and willing and knowing they needed to be saved. And now that Christ is come, our passage tells us, all those long gone saints are in the stands, looking down from heaven, rooting and cheering and hoping that we will see the Savior and believe the promise they passed our way and the learn our own orders from the gospel and run our own race toward heaven just as they ran in their day.

Because now, our passage tells us, Christ has come, we are in the home stretch! So it only makes sense for us to do what Jesus did. *"...let us lay aside every encumbrance and the sin that so easily entangles and let us run with endurance the race set before us, fixing our eyes upon Jesus the founder and finisher of the faith, who for the joy before him endured the cross, despising the shame and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."*

The mistake we make is to think that the race Jesus ran and the suffering he endured were first and foremost about us. Christ did love us and still loves us. But his first love and his last words of devotion on the cross were to his Father. *“Into your hands, I commit my spirit.”* Jesus said to a Father under whose orders Christ had come to live and teach and serve and die so that we could know and share his Father’s love.

It follows that wrapped in the love and forgiveness and healing and power that comes from believing and taking his Father as our own also comes the mission and the orders. Once we belong to Christ, we too become men and women under authority, who, like Jesus, are loved by the Father and are sent by him to love and serve others.