

Rev. Danny Mackey
Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 22, 2023
Matthew 8:1-13
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Lord, I am not worthy to have You come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.”

Our Gospel lesson has two parts: the healing of a leper and the encounter with the centurion. A preacher could approach either of these parts, preaching a fine sermon on either one. And, I suspect, many will do just that. Most will focus on Jesus’ encounter with the centurion—it’s more interesting. But there’s a common thread that runs through both parts. Along with the reading of General Naaman and Prophet Elisha, and also St. Paul’s instructions to the saints in Rome. And that common thread is, simply put, “authority.”

What does the leper say to Jesus? “Lord, if You will, You can make me clean.” The leper calls Jesus “Lord,” recognizing His authority. And how does Jesus reply? “Show yourself to the priest. Offer the sacrifice Moses commanded as proof.” Jesus, likewise, respects the authority of the priests, who sit in the seat of Moses. Did you know that Jesus even tells the people to listen to the High Priest Caiaphas because Caiaphas sat in the seat of Moses? Yep. This is the same Caiaphas that plotted Jesus’ arrest, sham trial, and crucifixion.

And then we have the centurion. Luke’s account tells us he was a god-fearing Gentile who paid for the synagogue in Capernaum. He was probably also the centurion who commanded the soldiers who executed Jesus on Calvary. We call him Longinus because of the long spear he used to pierce our Lord’s side with. If that’s the case, then he would be why we know what Pontius Pilate and Jesus said to each other on Good Friday. At the cross, Longinus declared, “Truly this [man] was the Son of God!”

When Jesus offers to go to the centurion’s house, the centurion immediately refuses. He knows what Jesus is offering. Jesus is offering to make Himself unclean. That’s why it takes a vision to get St. Peter to visit another centurion in Joppa in the Book of Acts. Even though he paid for the synagogue, the centurion wasn’t allowed to enter it. And here Jesus was offering to enter *his* house? No. He wouldn’t allow it. But the centurion understood the authority Jesus exercised. “I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me.” He tells Jesus to simply say the word and the servant will be healed.

Both the leper and the centurion recognize Jesus' authority.

So, what is authority? We struggle with this concept as a society. We often equate authority with tyranny. Many see protest against authority as a virtue, even saying that true patriots are those who protest against our country. Rebellion and revolt and vigilantism are seen as heroic. Just look at both our popular culture in comic books and movies—as well as political movements.

Using the comic books, we get the anti-authority slogan of “With great power comes great responsibility.” That’s wrong. It’s wrong because power and authority aren’t the same thing. Power doesn’t grant responsibility. Just because you can do something doesn’t mean you’re permitted to do so, or should do so. Power is the ability to do something. Authority is given to a person so that person is dutybound to exercise the responsibility. Spider-man and Batman are vigilantes. They have power but no authority. Police officers, on the other hand, have authority. They have both power and the responsibility to use power.

All authority is granted from above. Someone must give you authority. Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given unto Me.” Given to Him by His Father. At His name every knee shall bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth. So, Jesus has supreme authority. There is no part of our lives that His Word doesn’t have authority. He is Lord over all people and over all things, including our families, our government, and our church. And, as Lord, He respects those He’s given authority to. Like the centurion, Jesus entrusts responsibility to others, trusting them to do their duty.

Our Lord has given authority to fathers and mothers over their children. This is the clearest and most obvious granting of authority. The children are born to their parents. The parents name their children. Parents are responsible for providing shelter and clothing and food and education and a myriad of other things. They have both biological and legal responsibility to the child. And responsibility always presupposes authority.

Let me give you an example. When I, as a pastor, come over to a parishioner’s home, it’s not my place to correct or discipline the children. That’s the parents’ job. It also isn’t my place, unless asked, to lead the family prayer at mealtime. That’s the place of the spiritual head of the household: the father. Even the children rank higher in the household than the pastor. It’s the place of the spiritual head to ask me to pray in such a place and under such

circumstances. God has given those children to their parents. Parents are the supreme authority in the lives of their children. Parents have supreme responsibility for their kids.

And then there's the government. The government is nothing less than the families coming together, banding together for the welfare of the growing community. The more people you have in a place, the more it's necessary for government beyond the family to exist. So you've got all these fathers—what we know as the patriarchy—and they discover that one father is better at one thing than another. One might be particularly good at administration, another at fighting bears, another at teaching, and another at growing things. So one becomes the mayor and the others become a cop, an educator, and a farmer. And this government, of course, has the responsibility to tax so that roads and city walls and other things are there for protecting the people. The government, deriving its authority from the fathers, is responsible for protecting and providing for the people—or, at least, making sure that families can protect and provide for themselves.

Jesus acknowledges the government's authority when He says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's." He also acknowledges it when He submits to Pontius Pilate, who was given authority by God to crucify Jesus. That's why Jesus went as lamb before its shearers, silent and without complaint. The centurion who crucified Jesus also exercised his vocation, serving the authority above him. Because of his deep faith—a faith greater than in all of Israel—greater even than St. Peter who denied Jesus three times before the rooster crowed. Because of his deep faith, the centurion was able to nail his Lord and Savior to a tree and to lift Him up from the earth in humiliation. Not once would Jesus have looked in accusation against those crucifying Him. Not even for those religious leaders who mocked Him did Jesus have accusation. Instead, from the cross He prayed, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Jesus has also given authority to His Church and to those He's made pastors and teachers. They are to speak His Word, teaching you about things like authority and responsibility, about sin and forgiveness, about that which rules your hearts and minds. It is from God's Word—from Moses and the Prophets and the Apostles—that both the spiritual and moral are determined. Scripture tells us what God has done in Christ Jesus—like heal a leper, commend the centurion's faith, and die and rise again. These things shape us. We are shaped by the cross of Christ.

Authority gives purpose. If you want to know what your purpose in life is, look at the Table of Duties in the Small Catechism. As a parishioner, heed the Word of God your pastor preaches. As part of the government, serve the people. As a citizen, obey your government and support your leaders. As a husband, love your wife. As a wife, respect your husband. As a parent, provide and protect your children, bringing them up in the fear of the Lord. As children, obey your parents. As a worker, do your job. As an employer, treat your workers well. As youth, respect your elders. As a widow, put your trust in God. As just a human creature, love one another, just as Christ has loved you. These are your duties. They depend on your vocation, right? These duties give your life purpose.

And as a congregation, you have duties, too. To be a church, you need a pastor. That's why you called me to be yours. I only serve at your consent. But I can't do it all. And, in fact, I wouldn't be that great at doing it all. That's why you elected church officers like a president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. That's why you elected elders and others to care for certain areas of our work on the Lord's behalf. This is good. And, as the pastor, it's not my job to get in the way of the performance of the church officers' duties. That, as I like to say, is above my paygrade. And the same goes the other way.

It reminds me of a story about C.F.W. Walther, the founder of our beloved synod and pastor at historic Trinity in St. Louis. One day, while he was working on a sermon, Walther heard a commotion in the church sanctuary. He came out and found a trustee arguing with a parishioner. The parishioner had a corkscrew and a candle in his hand. Apparently, he wanted to screw a candleholder into his pew so he could have more light during the service. Walther came and said, "Gentlemen, what's going on here?" Both the trustee and the parishioner turned to him and replied, "With all due respect, pastor, this is none of your business." Knowing they were right, Walther nodded, turned back around and went back to writing his sermon.

Walther's job, like the job of every preacher, is to preach God's Word. It isn't to deal with water heaters or the color of the carpet. Sure, he might have an opinion, but he doesn't have authority to determine those things. That authority belongs to the congregation, of which he is also a member. That authority belongs to those the congregation has entrusted with those responsibilities. The congregation's authority is granted by Christ Jesus Himself.

St. Paul tells the churches that they have all things in Christ. That means that they have the authority and responsibility to Call pastors to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, to baptize and commune and bless. That means that congregations are dutybound to confess Christ as the Son of God and to extend God's kingdom. And because we have this authority, He gives us the power to do so. With great authority comes great responsibility.

Because He wants you to fulfill your duties, God strengthens you—and strengthens your faith. We are the many who have come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the patriarchs of old, the fathers of all believers. That table is the altar, upon which Jesus gives His body and blood. He enters our house so that we might be healed. Healed of our false ideas. Healed of our uncertainty about our responsibilities—and even our laziness to do what we ought. Healed of our sins. All so that we might be healed this very hour. So, come to the altar and receive from the God above you gives you authority and responsibility. Receive also from Him the strength to love Him and to serve your neighbor.

In Jesus' name.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ + Jesus.