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Pentecost 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Authority to Mercy”  
Text: Luke 7:1-10 (1 Kings 8; Galatians 1)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

***When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.”***

What exactly was it that made Jesus marvel? Whenever I heard this story before, I always thought it was the centurion’s statement about authority, and his faith that Jesus has that kind of authority. That just as the centurion has the authority to issue orders to the soldiers under him, so Jesus can issue orders - but not just to soldiers or people, but to diseases, sicknesses, demons, and death. Jesus has an authority that is even over these, and the centurion knew authority when he saw it.

I think that’s part of it, but not the main part. Not the main part because it seems like the elders of the Jews who went to Jesus on the centurion’s behalf to ask for help also believed that. They may not have been able to put it as eloquently as the centurion did, but they asked for Jesus to come and heal the servant - apparently believing that He could. For He had. Jesus had healed many of all kinds of afflictions. Clearly there was a power here, an authority here, though they may not have known *exactly* what it was; that Jesus was the true God in human flesh.

So the centurion’s belief that Jesus had that kind of authority is significant, but not what set him apart from the Jews and made Jesus marvel.

Yet there is something very different about the centurion; something very different in *his* statement from what the elders of the Jews said when they went to Jesus. For the Jews said: ***He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue.*** He is worthy of your help because of what he has done. But the centurion said something very different: ***Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof.*** It is not fitting, it is not right, for you to come to me.

But if the centurion is not worthy, *why ask at all?* Why ask for what he does not deserve and has not earned?

The answer, and what makes Jesus marvel, is in the first half of the centurion's statement about Jesus' authority - the neglected half. For the centurion, *before* saying that he has servants under him that he can order around, *first says this: **I too am a man set under authority***. He too has superiors and he must obey the orders given to him. **But notice carefully what he said there: I too. I also. I as well as you . . . am a man set under authority**. He doesn't see Jesus just as one who has authority, but as one who has been set under authority as well, with orders that He must do; must carry out. And what is the order Jesus has been given? Well, this: **to have mercy**. Not to give what is deserved, but to give what is not deserved.

Now that sounds funny in a couple of ways, doesn't it? For first, we usually don't think of Jesus as one under authority - He's God, after all, and there is no higher authority than God! And yet the Scriptures do speak in this way. In Hebrews, Jesus is called an *apostle* - that is: one who is officially sent by another to act with a certain authority (Hebrews 3:1). And what that authority is Jesus Himself explains in John, when He says things like this:

*When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me* (John 8:28).

*No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father* (John 10:18).

*For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak* (John 12:49).

*And then finally: The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works* (John 14:10).

Clearly, then, Jesus is one who has been sent and under the authority and orders of the Father. **With the authority and orders to have mercy**. And so the centurion is asking Jesus to do what He has been sent to do. Not because he's worthy, but because this is why Jesus came. To use His authority to have mercy.

But that's the second thing that sounds funny, isn't it? We usually don't put authority and mercy together. We usually think of them as being in two different categories. Almost like mercy is when you have authority over someone but don't use it.

But I think the reason we think that way is because our view of authority has been warped by sin and perverted by our sinful nature. And so, we think, authority isn't mercy, it is telling other people what to do, bossing them around, and getting what we want. So while authority isn't bad, the way we use it often is. And while it is necessary and needed, we don't like being under it - all the way back to Eve, when the Lord said to her,

that now, because of sin: *Your desire shall be for your husband* [to have authority over him], [but] *he shall rule over you* (Genesis 3:16).

So this is what made the centurion so marvel-worthy - **he saw Jesus' authority rightly**. As a good authority, a mercy authority, an authority untainted by sin. That Jesus was sent not to reward the deserving, but to have mercy on the undeserving. That He came not to commend the good, but to forgive the sinner. That He lived not to demand that we lay down our lives for Him, but to lay down His life for us. *And so Jesus marveled*. Here was a man who got it. His own people didn't get it - ***not even in Israel have I found such faith***, Jesus said. But this centurion did. He was the fulfillment of Solomon's prayer, **for a merciful God to mercifully hear and mercifully act**. He is an example for the Jews, and for us today.

For still today, we have a merciful God who mercifully hears and mercifully acts. For you. The "gospel of worthiness" is the "other gospel" of which Paul said: ***If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed***. Because that's not good news at all, if you have to make yourself worthy of God and worthy for Him to act for you. And it's not who God is at all. It is a gross false witness about God. Yet one we often think. A trap that is easy to fall into. To think that if I just do *this*, then God will like me better. Or that if things are going bad for me in my life, then God is liking me less. *You see how we make God and what He does and what He thinks dependent on what we do?* No. We need to repent of that thinking.

For the reality is that you ***received*** the Gospel, as Paul said, and quite apart from *anything* you've done. In fact, for most of you, it was when you were so small that all you could do was cry, eat, and soil your diaper! And yet a merciful God baptized you and made you His child.

You ***received*** the Gospel, in fact, quite *in spite* of all that you've done. For if you indeed got what you deserved because of your sin, then not one of us could have stood here this morning and confessed that we are sinful and unclean. The consequences would be too much for us. But we can, and did, because a merciful God mercifully hears our prayers and mercifully acts with His absolution.

And you will ***receive*** the Gospel again as you come to the altar today to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus, who by the authority He received from the Father laid down that Body and Blood into death, took it up again in His resurrection, and now lays it upon this altar, places it in your mouth, and pours it over your lips. Not because you're worthy, because you ***love our church and helped build it*** - but exactly because you're not. It is to ***make*** you worthy; to ***give*** you worthy; for Jesus to ***be*** your worthy.

In fact, the centurion's prayer is one that some pastors pray during the liturgy. *Lord, we are not worthy to have you come under our roof. But say the word and your servants will*

*be healed.* Say the Word. Your merciful Word. Your gracious Word. And He does, and we are.

That's who God is. And the centurion got it. We talked about that last week, but get another story today to drive that point home. Which is good, and needed, because satan and his false gospel keeps trying to drive it out and make us believe what is not true - the gospel of worthiness; the gospel of what we do; the gospel which is really no gospel at all.

And so today we see authority as it was meant to be - at least in the kingdom of the right, in the church. In the **kingdom of the left**, in the world and government, authority is about law and order - as it needs to be, to keep sin in check. It is exercised by sinners and so often times used wrongly and in ways it was never meant to be. But in the **kingdom of the right**, in the church, authority is not about law and order, but all about mercy. It is the authority to lay down your life not for God - He doesn't need it! - but for others. And not to make yourself worthy, *but because Jesus has made you well.*

*And what does that look like?* It looks like living under the authority placed over you for your good, and being respectful and obedient, even when that authority is misused by sinners. It looks like exercising the authority you have been given *in mercy* - not to get what you want, but to give what those under you need. It looks like husbands laying down their lives for their wives, and wives submitting to and loving their husbands. It looks like parents not exasperating their children, and children honoring their parents. It looks like helping those in need, forgiving those who hurt and wrong you, repenting to those you've hurt, receiving the good others have for you, and praying for all people, even your enemies. And that's just a few examples. But if you did *just those*, would not people today marvel?

And marvel not just at you, but at the God you have, and who has you. Who shows and teaches us the wonderful truth that authority and mercy really do go together. And He uses that authority, that mercy, for you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.