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WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR, AND WHO IS THE STRANGER?

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Luke 7.1-10

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum.² A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death.³ When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave.⁴ When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him,⁵ for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us."⁶ And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof;⁷ therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed."⁸ For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it."⁹ When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."¹⁰ When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is told a little later in Luke's gospel than our story as a response to the question, 'Who is my neighbor?' It's a shocking tale in which the traditional faith leaders fail miserably to show compassion, whereas the half-breed outsider, the mixed-race and mixed-faith, heretical Samaritan gets full marks for being a decent guy.

Luke tells of a Jesus who had little time for religion that played games with rules instead of showing some compassion.

Our story is three chapters before that of the Good Samaritan and, I would say, is just as offensive, and, to those who hear it with a generous spirit and a contrite heart, marvelously able to set us free from our prejudices.

Jesus heals a centurion's servant. How offensive is that! For about sixty years, Jews had chafed under Roman rule. People, for the most part, like to be free. But it was more than a lack of political freedom that irked Jews, many of whom believed that God was their king and that the reign of a strange far-away pagan emperor was a direct affront to their faith as well as their patriotism.

This centurion was the leader of at least eighty soldiers. His soldiers were in Capernaum to keep the peace and put down any disloyalty to Roman rule. This unnamed military man seems to have been a

decent fellow. Like many people, then and now, he was a religious seeker. Many Roman soldiers were followers of Mithras, a deity who originated in Persia. Romans were happy to find gods anywhere they could, so it's not too surprising that the centurion had built a place for Jewish worship in the town where he was stationed. He might have been trying, somewhat cynically, to buy the loyalty of local Jews.

Possibly, however, he didn't just find religion to be a convenient tool of oppression. The synagogue's board members tell Jesus: the centurion loves our nation. Perhaps he did. A surprising number of outsiders were attracted to the Jews' rather austere religion, and there were considerable numbers of converts to Judaism in the first century, who appreciated its emphases on one God and on how to behave with justice and integrity. The centurion looks to be, not a convert, but someone called a 'god-fearer', one among those many people who admired and to some extent followed Jewish faith as an outsider. But he was still a stranger, a member of the army of occupation, a reminder that Jews were not free to be themselves.

Most Jews had as little to do with Romans as possible. A few Jews would sit and brood over the possibilities of organizing a successful rebellion, whereas others would collaborate so as to make money by, for example, collecting taxes or providing food and other provisions for the soldiers. The elders of the Jewish synagogue who came to plead the soldier's case to Jesus were sailing close to the wind of treason. For how far can you accept things from a hated outsider, even holy things like a synagogue, maybe especially holy things, and not be tainted by association? Still the elders came and asked Jesus to heal the soldier's servant. Jesus would have been wise to put them off. You don't want to offend a garrison town's military commander. But neither do you want to help someone who's in charge of an army of occupation, or part of it. And there are always ways to duck and weave. Jesus could have said: 'You know guys. I'm right out of miracles, just now. You know how it is. A healing here. An exorcism there. Walking on the water this morning. Raising a widow's son yesterday. All this takes it out of a guy. Sorry. Give the commander my best. Hope his slave gets well. See you.'

Instead, Jesus healed the centurion's slave. This would be strike number one against him, in the minds of many of his own people. Why would you help a foreign soldier, an agent of the oppressive colonial power? Are you a coward? Are you a traitor? A sucker for sob stories? Or just dumb?

Strike number two is even more shocking to some, and to see why, we need to dig into the story a little deeper.

Slaves were two a shekel, or denarius, or penny, or whatever. So why did the centurion make a big deal out of this dying boy, his slave? For boy, or young man, he was. The Greek word here for the word which the centurion calls his servant is *pais*, a boy. In some Greek authors, the word *pais* was used to denote a boy who was the adolescent lover of an older man. Could that be the case here? We can't be sure. This is a gospel, not *The National Enquirer*. The gospels teach us, not by in your face sensationalism, but through a certain knowing reticence, to which an Englishman like me rather warms.

Nothing is said in the gospel of the precise nature of the relationship between the boy and the centurion. But, it doesn't need to be said. We know that boys as boys and slaves were easily replaceable. Why was this young man so important to the soldier? Was the centurion an especially nice man who took an interest in all those who worked for him? It seems unlikely. However good a master and a man he was, he was above all a soldier, used to men dying, and mostly young men dying, painfully, in battle. It seems odd that he should single one young man out of many. Unless he loved him.

Would Jesus have healed the boy if he knew that he was sleeping with the enemy? Greeks thought it was a rite of passage for a young man to be mentored by an older man, even sexually; Romans could be, shall we say, even more liberated; though even Romans might be taken aback by a soldier who allowed such a relationship to become too affectionate, for conventional lust to be overtaken by overwhelming love and a desperate sense of impending loss. Whatever Greeks and Romans allowed and did, Jews had an aversion to any form of same-sex physical relationship. And Jesus was a Jew. He accepted most of the customs and conventions of his people. But not all of them. His attitude towards women and those regarded as outside the pale by polite society was often generous and warm and knowing and understanding. He could change his mind, too, as when, on another occasion, a foreign woman so impressed him by her faith in his healing powers that his put down to her about her being a non-Jew was replaced by appreciation and amazement.

Something similar happens here. Before Jesus can respond to the pleas of the temple board, the centurion sent other friends to him. Behind the polite words he speaks through them, we can hear the important message the centurion's saying: 'Look, Jesus. I'm a man of power myself. I recognize power when I see it. I have faith that you can heal my boy; if you want to.' Jesus is amazed by this faith, where he didn't expect to find it and, admirably, heals the youngster.

It's not just a recognition of power that's at stake here. The centurion, ironically, as a soldier in command of many military men, is tuned in to Jesus' commitment to the power of God's compassion. Lots of people have power and abuse it. The centurion was, in effect, saying to Jesus: 'My power is the power of Caesar's legions that dominate the world through force. Your power is the power of love, which I know to be different than my source of power. I don't believe that you'll ignore my love for the boy, nor your God's love for all that he's made'. Extraordinarily, he, the ruthless man of worldly power called Jesus, a Galilean peasant, a nobody: sir. The translation says: Lord; but we'd say: sir. He knew this man, and respected him and what he could do, without ever having met him. So, Jesus heals, with no questions asked about the centurion's status as an agent of the colonial power; or even about his private life, though Jesus must have had his suspicions.

That was then. This is now. Jesus tells us: cut the red tape of religion; see beyond its doctrine and rules to what they really mean; and love, generously. Religions specialize in creating instructions and widely held convictions, understandably so. Like nations, religions are communities of people, and their behavior and common standards are reflected and enacted through the dogmas and rules that they accept, officially or by convention. They help us pull together and live in comparative harmony. But they are a means to a greater end, not the end in themselves.

Jesus taught that God's creative love demands a response in human love and compassion. Any one, however well meaning, who asks 'who is my neighbor' has missed the point. Rules and dogmas, the search for the right response or the correct answer can blind even goodhearted people to the astonishing breadth of God's love. So, when Jesus tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan as a response to the question: who is my neighbor, he ends by asking: who proved neighbor to the man in need. What you do in love matters, not how you justify whatever else you do. God loves everyone. Even a stranger. Even his boy toy. So must we.

--The Rev. Dr. Martin Forward