Sermon | Proper 4C (Matins)

TEXT: Luke 7:1-10

29 May 2016

“*Words and Authority”*

*In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.*

“*Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. But say the word and let my servant be healed*.”

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

Dear saints,

As we consider our text, this text from Luke 7, which gives us the healing of the centurion’s servant, I want you to consider the power of words, the power words have to change things, and transform things in huge and amazing ways. Now to be sure, not every word is all that powerful. If you’re sitting at a coffee shop with a friend chatting, or at a ball game talking to somebody, those words might go in one ear and out the other. You might forget about the conversation tomorrow. And so, not every word—in fact, not even most words exchanged between human beings, carry much weight.

But I’m sure that, for all of you, there are certain words which have literally changed your life.

For instance, those of you who are married, when your future husband or wife said for the first time, “I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.” And then at the altar, when they looked you in the eye and said, “For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, I do. I marry you.” Those are powerful words, words that changed your life when you heard them.

Or what about the men in the room. Waiting for the arrival of your first child. Let’s say, the days before they let you in the room to witness everything firsthand. You’re standing out in the waiting room with a box of cigars. And the doctor comes and says, “It’s a boy. It’s a girl. He’s happy. She’s healthy. Mom’s doing fine. Congratulations, *dad*.” That’s a word so powerful it changed your life when you heard it.

Or what about those of you who’ve ever had an enemy. Someone you’ve been fighting with for years. There was a big fight in the past. A falling out. And ever since, you haven’t seen, talked to the person. Ever since, you’ve hated the person’s guts, and they’ve hated yours. But then you see that person again after 20, 30, 40 years, and they say, “I forgive you, everything you’ve done to me. And I beg your forgiveness for all that I’ve done to you.” Words have the power to change us in huge ways.

This morning I want us to consider the power of God’s Word. What is God’s Word? The Word that I am preaching to you right now? Is it just a word that tells you about God? Teaches you about God? “This is how God wants you to live—his Law. This is what Jesus has done for you—his Gospel.” Does God’s Word convey information about God? Or, is God’s Word more than that? Does **God’s Word** actually change you when you hear it? **Deliver you from death when you hear it?** And the answer is that it does.

And I want to use an example to show you how this works. Let’s imagine you’re a prisoner on death row. You’ve been charge with a crime, a crime you most certainly did commit. And it was a capital crime, murder. And so the punishment for your crime is death. And you’re sitting there in your cell on the eve of the execution, having your last meal (steak and jelly beans or whatever) and you see somebody walking toward you from the end of the hall. He’s surrounded by a troop of guards dressed in their police uniforms and he’s walking toward you. And it’s the warden. And he walks up to your cell, and he says, “The Governor has just issued your reprieve. An innocent man has taken your place, has gone to the scaffold for you, died for you. And so tomorrow, instead of your execution, you’ll be set free.” And you’d say, “Awesome.” That’s **a word so powerful that it actually delivers you from death when you hear it.**

And that, dear saints, is how God’s Word works. This is what it says: you and I, together with the rest of humanity are under a death sentence. We’ve broken God’s Laws, and transgressed his commands. And the wages of sin, our sin, is death. And so this is where God’s Law puts us: in the prison cell. We’re the inmate on death row, awaiting the sentence of our condemnation to be carried out.

But then the Gospel comes, and tells us of the innocent man. That our Lord Jesus Christ has come into this world, to take your place under the Law, to die for you, to suffer the punishment you deserved because of sin. So that now, because of Jesus, and the sacrifice he made for you on the cross, you’re free: free from the Law’s condemnation, free from the sentence of death, free in the forgiveness of all of your sins. That’s what the Gospel says: you are free.

And we have to understand, this Gospel is the most powerful and transformative word in all the world. It carries with it the power to free you and save you, to deliver you from sin and death, to unburden your conscience, unshackle your fear, destroy your enemies, and comfort you, to takes away all fear and anxiety and worry, and gives you the peace that passes understanding—just by hearing it.

That’s the power of the word of the Gospel. But one question remains: if, in our little illustration, you’re the prisoner on death row, and Jesus is the innocent man who takes your place, and God is the governor who grants your reprieve, who is the warden? Who is the person who is under orders? Sent by the governor’s authority, to give you this saving message?

Now I don’t want you to start thinking me as a warden. But it’s your pastor. It is called and ordained servants of Christ. Jesus says to his Apostles on the night he rose from the dead, “Go and forgive sins in my name. Whatever sins you forgive on earth are forgiven in heaven.” And so, this is why I’m here. This is why God has called me to this place in Garrett, Ind.: to give you this Word, this word that frees you, absolves you, forgives your sins in Jesus’ name.

But here’s the point: the word of forgiveness that I speak is not my word—it’s God’s Word. Just like the word that the warden was not his word, but the Governor’s word. He was just a man under orders, a man under authority, who was sent to pass on that good news. And that’s what pastors are: men under orders, men under authority, to pass along the good news of salvation.

I say all of this as a bit of a lead up, to talk about the text today, the healing of the centurion’s servant. And there’s a lot we could say about this centurion to commend him. But the most amazing thing about this centurion is that he recognizes Jesus’ authority, and the power of his Word.

What is a centurion? A Roman soldier, who had about 100 or so soldiers, underneath him. A commander, leader of men. We’re told in the Gospel that this particular centurion he was a benefactor to the Jewish community in Capernaum. Even though he himself wasn’t a Jew, he built for the Jews their synagogue. So he was a respected, beloved figure in the eyes of the community.

And that’s why, when his servant falls ill, and becomes sick to the point of death, the Jews come to Jesus and say, “Look. If there’s anyone you should help, it’s this guy. He is a friend of our nation. He built our synagogue. He’s worthy for you to help him.” And so Jesus grants the request. And starts walking toward the centurion’s house. But as he’s going there, we’re told, the centurion sends friends to Jesus who says:

*“Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof.**Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. For I too 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 servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”*

In other words, what’s he saying? He’s saying, “Look, Jesus, I’m a man under orders. I know what it is to be under authority. And I know what it’s like to speak a word of authority, a word of power. I know how words can get things done. I say to one servant, “go,” and he goes. To another, “come” and he comes. To another, “do this,” and it’s done.”

“And I recognize too, Jesus, that you are a man under orders, a man under authority, the authority your heavenly Father. You have been sent to preach the world forgiven and free of the curse of death. That’s your work Jesus. And I recognize too the limits of my authority. My authority stops at the sickbed of my servant. No longer can I say, “go” and my servant will go. Obviously, because he’s dying. He can’t go. Here, in the face of death, my words have no authority. This is above my pay grade. So I am appealing to a higher authority, your authority, Jesus, and the power of your word, to make it happen, to get it done.”

And then these amazing words, as Jesus comes to heal his servant, “*Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof. But say the word, and my servant shall be healed*.”

Say the Word. That’s trust, faith in the power of Jesus’ word. Did you know that, from ancient times, this sentence, the centurion’s sentence has been used by Christians as a prayer, a prayer they’d say, right at the rail, just before receiving our Lord’s body? “*Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof* [the roof of my mouth]*. But say the word* [Take eat. This is my Body]*, and your servant shall be healed*.”

Notice too how he comes to Jesus in humility. Remember how the Jews said, “Look, if anyone’s worthy for you to pay attention to him, and hear his petition, and answer his request, it’s this guy. He’s worthy. He built our synagogue.” And it’s ironic. Because it’s the exact opposite of how he talks about himself. He comes to Jesus and says, “Not worthy.” “*Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof*.”

And that, dear saints, is the picture of humility. He comes to Jesus as a beggar. He stands in great need of Jesus’ help, but he has nothing to bring. No worthiness, no merit, no worth, by which he deserves to have Jesus hear him. And so it is for us. But you see, its sinful human nature that we always want to bring something to God. And I think it would be tempting—you know the hypothetical situation, where you get to the end of your life, standing at the pearly gates, and St. Peter is there saying, “why should I let you in?”—it would be tempting in that situation, to point to something we did. Maybe our Church attendance, or our giving, or our volunteering or some other good work, to use as evidence to prove we’re good Christians who are worthy to receive the Lord’s benefits.

But this centurion does the opposite. He comes with his hands empty, in the recognition of his unworthiness, his helplessness, and his sin. And, he comes in the recognition of Jesus’ authority, and the power of his word, to change and transform us in huge ways, the power of Jesus’ Word, to deliver from sin and death. And that’s how we come to the altar every Sunday (except the 5th Sunday). After all, who is worthy to receive our Savior’s most holy body and blood in the Sacrament? And the answer is, only those who know and feel their unworthiness, and their helplessness and their sin. Only those who know they have nothing to bring to God at all, but come believing and trusting that God is a God of grace and compassion and love who truly receives the unworthy and the sinner.

And so, let us learn by the example of this centurion, to trust in the power of Jesus word, the word he calls his servants to speak by his authority, to change and transform us in huge ways.

*In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*