

## *Honoring Veterans without Glorifying War*

Luke 7:1-10

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All the military figures that appear in the New Testament are agents of the Evil Empire. We might forget that, given the general reverence in which the military is held in our society. When we read a story about a Roman soldier, we need to remember that this was an enemy soldier, part of an occupation force.

Jesus was a Jew, and he cannot have been thrilled any more than his countrymen to have his country overrun by foreigners who then took charge. The New Testament—and much of the Old—is written from the perspective of a conquered people. Our own history of having been a colony may lead us astray in our thinking, because the British who ruled over the American colonies were, after all, the same ethnic group with the same language and the same religion. What we find in the New Testament is something more like British rule over Nigeria or India, where the white people were put in charge of an ethnic group and a religion deemed inferior. Perhaps the Roman Empire wasn't as bad as some of the other empires that had overrun Israel in centuries past, but they still kept their soldiers in place and taxed heavily and controlled the government. When the early church fathers said in the creed that Jesus was "crucified under Pontius Pilate," it was a reminder that Jesus was not put to death by the Jews. He was put to death by the military government of Rome. He was put to death by us (the Fathers said), our own Empire in which we still live.

So when we find Jesus treating Roman soldiers with respect, and when we find the gospel writers themselves treating the occupying military with respect, we ought to be a little surprised. It's not an accident that in both Matthew and Luke the story of the Roman centurion who had faith in Jesus is placed after Jesus' teaching that we are to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us...and pray for those who abuse us. When Jewish listeners heard words about someone striking your cheek with the back of his hand or demanding that you carry his pack for a mile, they would have thought of Roman soldiers—the same ones who eventually tortured Jesus and put him on a cross.

In the passage we read from Luke 7, Jesus is in the town of Capernaum, on the north side of the Sea of Galilee, the town which was the very center of his ministry. In that town there was a centurion, unnamed, who commanded a force of probably 60-80 in the Roman garrison there. He was an important person in town. He must have been very generous; the Jewish elders tell Jesus to do him a favor because he loved the Jewish people and built them a synagogue. I've walked through the ruins of that synagogue in Capernaum, as some of you have. This is the man who built it who now comes to Jesus asking for a healing for his slave, whom he loves. The remarkable thing about this Roman military man is that he believes in Jesus' authority over sickness (and perhaps evil spirits) so much that he doesn't even think Jesus needs to come to his house to lay hands on his slave. "Only speak the word," he says, "and my servant will be healed." Jesus says, in effect, "You're a Gentile saying this. I haven't found a single Jew—among my own people—with that kind of faith."

The soldier gives an explanation for his faith. He knows what it is to be under authority, he says. He knows what it is to exercise authority. If I say "Go" or "Come" to the soldiers in my command—or to my slave—they will do it. In the same way I am confident that you have authority over disease. If you tell the disease to go, it will go. It seems to be a case of "It takes one to know one." A person with real authority recognizes it in another person. Of course the end of the story is that Jesus does not *even* need to say a word. The soldier goes home and finds his slave in good health.

When I read this story I am reading through the eyes of an anti-war kid whose formative years were during the Vietnam War. I'm surprised by the story on two levels. First, while you would expect a Jewish teacher to affirm Jewish nationalism and therefore hate the oppressor, Jesus treats the Roman military leader as a person. He sees beyond the uniform to see the person, and treats him with kindness. He sees that beyond his loyalty to another country—one whose goals and values Jesus could never affirm—there is the heart of a good man who loves people and is able to believe in Jesus' authority. It's like a Japanese man in 1949 being able to see that my father, an American army officer, was a good man when he tried to develop friendships with Japanese neighbors. It's like a civilian in Iraq or Afghanistan seeing beyond the American uniform and flak-jacket and helmet to see that the occupying soldier is not so different from me—and may even love me.

But the second level of surprise for me as a former hippie-wannabee is that this enemy soldier is portrayed as an admirable person. This is the same Jesus who said "Blessed are the peacemakers," but he shows only respect for a military man. In Luke as well as in Matthew it is clear that Jesus taught non-violence. Turn the other cheek. Do not return evil for evil. Do not live by the law of "an eye for an eye," but forgive those who harm you. Do not give allegiance to Caesar that belongs to God. And it is clear that the early Christians were adamant both that Christ is Lord rather than Caesar and that Christians could not take up the sword—in fact, refusing to enter the military was the norm among Christians for the first three centuries. But this same Jesus who taught peace does not demonize the enemy soldier, but holds him up as a model of faith.

You find the same kind of thing in Luke's second volume which we call the Book of Acts. The turning point in the book, in a way, is the story of the Roman centurion named Cornelius (in chapter 10). Up to this point, the Jesus movement has been a sect among the Jews. It is the Cornelius story that opens the church up to non-Jews, and it starts with a military man. The first Gentile to come to faith in Christ is an enemy soldier. Luke could have described Cornelius this way: He was a pagan, a foreigner, an Italian, who was part of the occupying force in our country who ought to leave here as soon as possible. But Luke—knowing, as he does, what the Spirit is going to do—describes Cornelius this way: "He was a devout man who feared God...he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God." That makes me wonder if we could ever describe our own enemies that way. Can you imagine the controversy that would be caused if NBC News were to begin a story on a Taliban officer by saying that "He is a devout man who fears God, gives alms generously, and prays constantly"? And yet that is no doubt true of many of our enemies.

But my point this morning is that here is a military officer who does not live by Jesus' teachings of nonviolence who is described as an altogether admirable person. God hears Cornelius' prayers and an angel speaks to this soldier telling him exactly where to find Peter in another city hours away, so that Peter can tell him about Jesus. When Peter gets the message he has to make a decision because it is against his Jewish religion to go into the house of a Gentile, much less an enemy soldier. And yet, because God gives him a vision, Peter goes and he sees with his own eyes that the Gentiles can believe and that the Holy Spirit is being poured out on his enemies.

On this day when our nation honors veterans for their military service, a question that comes up—at least among liberals—is whether we can honor military service without praising war. A related question is "If we honor veterans who served in a war we don't believe in, are we giving approval to the war?" If you take it for granted—as I do, based on the historical evidence—that the early Christians were opposed to war, and that early Christians were no fans of the Roman Empire, it seems that these stories about centurions offer us an answer. Surely Jesus did not agree with the Romans' right to wage war against Judea. Surely Peter felt that the Roman taking of Jewish territory was immoral. And yet both of them honored centurions who lived honorably within the constraints of

their military calling. If we oppose wars this country has fought—on moral grounds—in Vietnam or Granada or Iraq or Afghanistan, we can still honor the men and women who served there.

When the apostle Paul is giving advice to the young pastor he had mentored, Timothy, he uses the metaphor of a soldier when urging Timothy to be tough and focused and not give up. (2 Timothy 2:3-4) “Share in suffering like a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one serving in the army gets entangled in everyday affairs; the soldier’s aim is to please his commanding officer.” One virtue of a good soldier is that he chooses to suffer for the sake of others. Another virtue is that his life is focused with a clear purpose: to please his commander. So these military values are values of the Christian, even though Paul says elsewhere that “We do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world... We demolish *arguments* and every *pretension* that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take capture every *thought* to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:3-5 NIV).

If we praise soldiers, are we praising war? From the New Testament, it would seem that the answer is no. The default position for the Christian is that war is wrong. If we have to engage in war, it is only because it is the lesser of two evils, not because it is a positive good. Most early Christians were pacifists until the Roman Empire itself became Christian. But even when Christians agreed that war could be “just,” they always said that it must be a last resort, that it had to be proportional in scale to the harm that was being defended against, that the military must never attack civilians, and the goal of war must be to establish peace. Christians are opposed to war. Nevertheless, following the pattern of Jesus in Luke and the Holy Spirit in Acts, we honor the virtue of those who serve in the military.

My father is one of those World War II veterans who never talked much about his experiences in the war—at least until he got into his 90’s. Before my mom died, I think he felt it was kind of selfish to talk about himself—or maybe he just couldn’t get a word in edgewise. When the war started he was in seminary, and had to leave seminary to take his officer’s commission in the Army, serving in the artillery, first as a trainer at Fort Benning and later in France. But he was never one of these guys who bragged about his service or acted as if that was the most important thing he did in his life. To him, it wasn’t. Telling the Japanese about Jesus was the most important thing. My dad was not someone who felt that the war was the time when he was most alive, the way you hear it from some guys. No, it was his duty, and it was a necessary evil to shoot explosives at German soldiers. When I was in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, living in Tokyo, they began broadcasting the show *Combat* with Vic Morrow on Japanese television, as strange as that seems. The American soldiers spoke Japanese and you could only assume that Japanese audiences were cheering for the Americans against the Germans. But after we’d watched a few episodes—and I imagine my brother and I were pretending to shoot each other with machine guns—my parents told us we could no longer watch that show, because in their opinion it glorified war. War is not something to cheer about. War is terrible. Soldiers may be good, but war is bad.

There was an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* last Sunday by a professor at the Naval Academy lamenting “The Permanent Militarization of America” [<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/05/opinion/the-permanent-militarization-of-america.html>]. He was reflecting on President Eisenhower’s warning in his farewell address of the growing influence of the military-industrial complex. (Ike’s first draft called it the military-industrial-congressional complex, which was right on the money.) But the professor pointed out that Eisenhower warned of the spiritual effects on the country of this constant interest in things military and a constant state of war. What damage is done to our souls by playing video games like “Call of Duty” and by watching TV shows which glamorize the military in order to sell products? Why should lawmakers make appeals to “support our troops” to sell unnecessary bases in their districts? To make supporting the military uncritically a test of being American does damage to our national life. And this was coming from the Naval Academy.

Christians can never endorse the idea of a nation in a perpetual state of war. We cannot endorse aggression against other nations or against civilians under any conditions. At the same time, we give honor to those who serve in the military—not because they promote war, but because they are models of giving your life for others, of dedication and discipline. We honor them without honoring everything they did, and we honor what they did to the extent it helped to establish peace.

Let me close with the words of the prayer Dwight Eisenhower used to close his farewell address in 1961:

We pray that peoples of all faiths, all races, all nations, may have their great human needs satisfied; that those now denied opportunity shall come to enjoy it to the full; that all who yearn for freedom may experience its spiritual blessings; that those who have freedom will understand, also, its heavy responsibilities; that all who are insensitive to the needs of others will learn charity; that the scourges of poverty, disease and ignorance will be made to disappear from the earth, and that, in the goodness of time, all peoples will come to live together in a peace guaranteed by the binding force of mutual respect and love.