

# Trinity Church (ELCA)

Stephens City, Virginia

## Sunday's Sermon

May 28, 2016

The Rev. Mr. Cameron P. Keyser

Pentecost 2C-Memorial Day

'Authority' isn't a word that brings up lots of 'warm and fuzzy' reactions for most of us. For me, the first image that comes to mind is that of my parents: 'cracking the whip' and making me 'toe the line' – while I continued to spew my teenage insolence, and 'push the envelope' every chance I had. I needed to do that – I had to convince them that I really *did* 'know' everything...

It didn't work. And, somewhere, I probably still have the calendar I kept showing how many days I was grounded every month.

Finally, I 'caught on:' they had the 'authority' – whether I liked it or not – and had the moral and legal – maybe even spiritual – right to exercise it. I didn't see it at the time, but as I look back, I realize they exercised it with compassion and love and care. I soon discovered – listen up here, teenagers: that, as my mom often told me in an entirely different context: *'You get more flies with honey than you do with salt...'*

You may need a minute to process that: *'You get more flies with honey than you do with salt:'* that is to say that 'getting along' is better than 'getting your way' – which is, as a teenager – often the only 'goal' we know how to pursue.

The great ULCA basketball coach, John Wooden, had a rule: none of his players could have facial hair: no mustaches, no goatees, no chin hair – nothing. Well, one day – after a 10 day semester break, his All-American center - Bill Walton – strutted in sporting a health growth of new facial hair.

Before the warm-ups, coach Wooden said, "Bill, have you forgotten something?.."

"Ahhh...coach," Walton protested, "if you mean the beard, I think I ought to be allowed to wear it. It's my right."

The coach looked at Walton kindly: "Do you believe in that strongly, Bill?"

"Yes I *do*, coach," Walton replied. "Very much."

Crossing his arms over his chest – but still looking at Walton with kindness, Wooten said, "Bill, I have a great respect for people who stand up for those things in which they believe. I admire anyone with deep

convictions such as you have, I really do...and we're *all* really gonna' miss you."

10 minutes and a locker room later, Walton trotted back in. The beard was gone. The issue wasn't about facial hair - the issue was *authority*: a valuable lesson that there is a duty in respecting authority...the right kind of authority.

That's what's at issue and at stake in this morning's Gospel text. Only twice in Scripture are we told that 'Jesus wept:' once on learning of the death of his best friend Lazarus, and again on his way to the cross as he wept over Jerusalem. And, there are only a couple times he seems to have been at a loss for words: once when the people of his own hometown tried to run him out on a rail and over a cliff – he just couldn't understand their anger. and, then today: astounded at the faith of this unseen and unlikely stranger.

A Roman Centurion commanded – usually quite ruthlessly – a hundred men: rough, tough, seedy guys: the kind that'd bring you to tears if your daughter ever brought one home...the kind of men who not only needed – but could not function – even as individuals – without direct, non-nonsense discipline and authority. A Centurion would be something like our 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant: a little green in the experience, but full of "pee-pee and vinegar," as they say...and bravado.

Now, remember: this is a guy who Jesus never met – the Centurion ordered some of the Jewish Temple leaders to go find Jesus in his stead. Now, can't you just imagine how they felt: having to take orders from an occupying soldier from the despised Roman Empire to go find this upstart roaming preacher who they were having "difficulty" with anyway. Talk about humbling!

But, they went – with some very kind words about this particular soldier – even though he was a Roman: *"They appealed to him earnestly, saying: "he is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and even built our synagogue for us."*

There's quite a bit of unexpressed faith there, too: the assumption that this Jesus could – indeed – do

what the Centurion had asked: to heal “*the slave whom he highly valued.*”

But, it’s the *Centurion’s* insight that’s really remarkable: Jesus - like himself - is a man of authority. Like a Centurion’s power is derived from elsewhere, so, too, does he see Jesus with an “outside” authority who can simply say a word and heal. Such depth of insight - Jesus had not encountered even among his own people...what a surprise!

Sometimes, one of the delights of life is the joy of the unexpected. It wasn’t so “joyful” for Carolyn and Jay – or me for that matter - last Monday morning – and it was certainly “unexpected.” But, more often than not, our lives are often “interrupted” with unanticipated delight: like last night when we met a beloved 83 year-old member of my congregation in Charleston who had let me know she would be visiting her daughter in Brunswick – and wanted to see us again. So, we met them at the track – for the *buffet*.

Yes, your pastor and his wife met a parishioner at the *race* track over in Charles Town – and even celebrated Holy Communion right there in the parking garage... what a pleasant surprise.

Surprises like: Michael didn’t break anything... Cody is responding well to his medication...our best friends since high school call to tell us they’re gonna’ be grandparents, too – talk about unexpected – let alone hard to believe...the surgery does more than expected...the IRS actually sends you a refund...Life is full of surprises – even for Jesus: like today when he finds such faith in a very unlikely person.

Who would expect to find faith in a *Jew* from a *Roman* occupier? Jesus must’ve done one heckuva’ Happy Dance at this unexpected discovery of faith – just as *I* did this week when I learned that a friend had – unexpectedly – decided to join the church. I couldn’t contain my delight: sending 10 smiley face “emoji” in my email response.

#### **Sources Consulted**

James Merritt, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com)

King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com)

Usually – thanks to our fallen human nature - authority and faith are mutually exclusive: the more powerful you are, the less you need faith...because you’re already filled-to-the-brim with “you.” How refreshing to find people like a Roman Centurion, or a Jimmy carter, or even Tom Hanks and his wife, Rita Wilson: filled to the brim with faith as well – but faith in Christ!

“The major religion I was exposed to as a kid was Catholicism,” Hanks recalls. “My stepmother became a Mormon...my aunt, whom I lived with for a long time, was a Nazarene – which is kind of like a super-charged Methodist, and in high school, all my friends were Jews. For years, I went to Wednesday-night Bible studies with my church group.

So I had this” sort of “nomadic” overview of various faiths, and the one thing I got from that was that there was a lot of great stuff to think about.” I *am* pretty ‘religious,’ I guess, he says and worships as a Greek Orthodox almost every week. *Why?*: To confront the great unanswered questions of humankind – questions that Hanks says, “for the most part, only religion attempts to answer.”

Unexpected faith from an unlikely source.

Author Max Lucado remembers playing football as a little kid out in the burr-infested fields of west Texas. Sometimes, after a big tackle, a player would find himself covered in stinging, burning grass burrs. The game came to a stop while the player pulled out each of the burrs one-by-one. But, Lucado trusted no one but his dad to pull out the burrs – like some kids who trust only Mom to get that week-old Band-Aid off their knee...so he’d leave the game, go home, and get his father to pull out the burrs, then - back to play.

Well, you know, sometimes there are burrs in *life* that only *our* Father can remove. The *Centurion* knew that. Maybe that’s the *lesson* we can learn. Amen.