

Called to Serve

The scripture reading for today continues the idea that our God is a God of all people. During the month of October, we learned about Ruth, an outsider because she was a Moabite. Ruth demonstrated that she was a **righteous gentile**. God included Ruth in the genealogy of David, Israel's most revered king. If David has a Moabite ancestor, then the community of faith is likewise called to welcome into its midst all who are "other."

The reading of Luke 7:1-10 features another person who is the "other." This time, the expectation of those hearing the first telling of this story is that the Centurion is the **enemy**. A Centurion, a professional officer of the Roman Army, was part of the occupying force of Israel. A Centurion commanded about 80 legionnaires, (in today's world, they would be called heavy infantry), and 20 servants and orderlies, (in today's world, they would be called support staff). They had a reputation for dealing out harsh punishment. The symbol of authority of the Centurion was a vine staff, which was used to discipline soldiers and even citizens of Rome. Centurions had to be literate, have connections, be at least 30 years old, and have served at least a few years in the military. They received much higher pay. Centurions had important social status and held powerful positions in society.

The idea that a Centurion would highly value a slave is **unexpected**. Slaves were property. They typically were prisoners of war, or sailors captured and sold by pirates, so most were foreigners. They worked everywhere: in private homes, on farms, in mines. Their lives were harsh. They could be rented out, sold, cruelly mistreated, or even killed by their owners. So, the concern shown by the Centurion for a slave was unusual. It might be that this slave had valuable skills. The death of this slave could mean a financial loss, as it would be expensive to replace their skills. It might be that the Centurions' concern was motivated by **benevolence**. We do not know for sure what motivated the Centurion.

The story continues by introducing some Jewish elders. Jewish elders were older, held a distinct social position, and were considered wise. They protected the family and patriarchal interests, and settled disputes. So, it was unusual that a Centurion would ask Jewish elders to appeal on his behalf. What the Centurion wanted was to ask Jesus to heal his slave. What is even more **unexpected** is how the Jewish elders describe the Centurion. They tell Jesus that the Centurion who sent them, "is worthy" of having Jesus heal the seriously ill and dying slave, because the Centurion **loves** the Jewish people and has built a **synagogue** for them. Building a synagogue would have been very expensive. So, the

Centurion is not just a man of words but also a man of action consistent with his words, a man of integrity.

According to Luke 6, Jesus had been teaching and healing people. Jesus taught those who would listen that we should **love** our **enemies**. He left where he had been teaching and entered Capernaum in order to live out his message. The response of Jesus to the appeal by the elders was to go to the house of the Centurion. An **unexpected** thing happened on his way there. This time the Centurion sent his friends to Jesus to convey his message. The Centurion did not want to trouble Jesus, for the Centurion was **not worthy** to have Jesus in his home. The Centurion was **not worthy**, so he did not presume to come to Jesus. You might think that the Centurion simply did not want to be seen having Jesus enter his home, as this might undermine the Centurion's social status. Or you might attribute this to the virtue of **humility**.

The Centurion explains that as a man of authority, he orders people to do things and he expects his orders to be obeyed. The **unexpected** happens when the Centurion implies that Jesus is under authority of the God of Israel. The Centurion thinks of Jesus as one who commands others. Jesus' commands are directed toward the healing of others, and Jesus' commands produce results. Jesus' words are carried out because of the authority Jesus embodies. The faith affirmed in this story attributes the

power and authority of Jesus to the one who sent Jesus. The Centurion emphasizes the sureness with which Jesus' commands will be carried out. The Centurions' faith is rewarded, as the slave is found to be in good health when the friends sent to speak with Jesus return to the house.

Through this story, Jesus offers us surprises about faith. The Centurion is not of the household of Israel, yet Jesus celebrates the Centurion's faith. Jesus sees faith as trust that God can bring transformation.

How does this story relate to present day Military Service Members? They also are under authority. Officers and senior non-commissioned officers have the same expectation as the Centurion. When they give an order, they expect that order to be followed. The warrior ethos still exists. Since the Centurion role is closest to the Army of today, we will review the U.S. Soldier's creed.

The Army warrior's creed is:

I am an American Soldier.

I am a Warrior and a member of a team.

I serve the people of the United States, and live the Army Values.

I will always place the mission first.

I will never accept defeat.

I will never quit.

I will never leave a fallen comrade.

I am disciplined, physically and mentally tough, trained and proficient in my warrior tasks and drills.

I always maintain my arms, my equipment and myself.

I am an expert and I am a professional.

I stand ready to deploy, engage, and destroy the enemies of the United States of America, in close combat.

I am a guardian of freedom and the American way of life.

I am an American Soldier.

The Army, Navy, and Air Force all have similar values.

Since the Centurion role is closest to the Army of today, we will look at the seven basic values of the United States Army:

Loyalty - Bear true faith and allegiance to the U.S. Constitution, the Army, your unit and other soldiers.

Duty - Fulfill your obligations.

Respect - Treat people as they should be treated.

Selfless Service - Put the welfare of the nation, the Army, and your subordinates before your own.

Honor - Live up to all the Army values.

Integrity - Do what's right, legally and morally.

Personal Courage - Face fear, danger, or adversity [physical or moral].

Do you see a relationship between the current Army beliefs and values and the integrity and humility of the Centurion? The characteristics that were valued in

warriors of the past are also valued today. This is both a strength and a vulnerability.

My work as the Spiritual Fitness and Spiritual Care Program Manager in support of the Consortium for Health and Military Performance (CHAMP) involves measuring the extent of connectedness a military service member feels between self and God, between self and others, and their sense of meaning and purpose. These three scales create a profile that a military chaplain can use to identify those at risk of suicide, and what programs are most likely to meet the spiritual needs of the unit. My work also involves creating a Field Manual of Chaplaincy Best Practices so military chaplains know what makes spiritual programs most effective for a given unit. Our current project is Warfighter Readiness: Optimizing Human Performance, where my team is looking at the sense of being called to serve. One barrier to Human Performance Optimization is Moral Injury.

Moral injury is a normal human response to the spiritual aspect of trauma. During times of war a Military Service Member's personal ethical code may clash with what is expected of them during war. Moral injury may be experienced by a Military Service Member who witnessed or perpetrated an act in combat that went against their deeply held moral beliefs and expectations. It may be experienced when warriors who have been transgressed

against, feel a sense of betrayal and anger. The result is increased risk of suicide due to demoralization, self-harming, and self-handicapping behaviors.

Moral injury refers to an injury to an individual's moral conscience and values resulting from an act of perceived moral transgression, which produces profound emotional guilt and shame, and in some cases also a sense of betrayal, anger and profound "moral disorientation". From ancient warriors to modern Military Service Members, soldiers in combat feel moral anguish from witnessing catastrophic suffering and severe cruelty, shaking their fundamental beliefs about humanity and their worldview. Military Service Members who are deployed into war zones are usually exposed to death, injury, and violence. Moral injury focuses on symptoms related to guilt, shame, anger, and disgust. Shame has been linked to complications such as interpersonal violence, depression, and suicide. The consequences of moral injury can be disastrous. An individual with a moral injury can experience severe distress, including major depression, and suicidality.

Factors such as humility, gratitude, respect and compassion have shown to either be protective or provide for hope for Military Service Members. Treating moral injury is often thought of as "soul repair" of souls in anguish. There needs to be openness on the part of

civilians to hear the veterans' experiences without prejudice. Fully coming "home" means integration into a culture where one is accepted, valued and respected, has a sense of place, purpose, and social support. Our God is a God of all people. Even the Centurion of the past and the Military Service Member of today. Our call, as the people of God, is to be open and welcoming. We are called to listen with compassion.