

A Soldier's Heart
November 12, 2006

Today we continue our preaching series on the fundamentals of our faith. Today the focus is on an extraordinary centurion whom we encounter in the Gospel of Luke. I'm reading from the 7th chapter, verses 1-10. If you brought your Bible along, please turn to Luke, Chapter 7 and follow along with me. Or, if you prefer, the sermon outline includes the full text. I invite you to follow along as I share with you the Word for today from the very Word of God.

This is what is written:

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to Him, asking Him to come and heal his slave. When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having You do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." 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; therefore, I did not presume to come to You. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I am also 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." 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.' When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

Here ends the lesson. Will you pray with me, please? Lord God, Almighty, this day, inspire our hearts with the witness and testimony of the faith of the centurion 2,000 years ago. May we this day discern what it means to live under your authority. In Christ, Amen.

Bill Scully is a good member of our congregation who typically attends the 11 o'clock service and sits right up in the front row with his wife, his mother, and his in-laws. After worship last Sunday, he drew me aside, clearly shaken, and wanted to share an account of what had happened the Friday before. Bill, you see, is the principal at Hickman Mills High School. Their football team made it to the Division Championships, which were held a week ago, Friday. Bill wanted to build team spirit and so he did what every good principal does; he bribed his students. (Interrupted by laughter) He said that he would charter buses to transport everyone from the school to the football game and on the way they would stop off at McDonald's, and he, Bill, would pay for all of their meals. Three busloads of kids pulled out from the school and made their way to McDonald's, where Bill spent about \$250 out of his own pocket (luckily, McDonald's gave him a break!) While they were at McDonald's, a war of words broke out between two young women:

one was an employee of the McDonald's, and one was a student at the school. Somehow, they knew each other and took that opportunity to renew their enmity. (Please understand, these are young women who started a verbal brawl in the McDonald's.)

Anyway, they all left and went to the game and Bill's team won a resounding victory (I believe the score was 24 to 10). You can imagine the elation and excitement! Following the return trip, the buses pulled into the school parking lot to find families and friends waiting in front of the gymnasium. There were mothers and toddlers, proud parents and grandparents. It was a carnival atmosphere, until a car pulled up, filled with supporters of the McDonald's employee who had earlier exchanged heated words with the student. Bill said to me that, having lived all over the country (even in Manhattan, New York) and having traveled all over the world, he had never previously heard the sound of gunfire. It rang out that night, and bedlam ensued. Women were crying, gathering up their little children, running for the safety of the gymnasium, stumbling and falling. It was a melee, which Bill said was simply indescribable; he could not quite believe that it was true and that it was happening here in Kansas City. He was shocked. It was only by a miracle that no one was struck by a bullet, as there were that many shells discharged. And he looked at me last Sunday and said, "Jim, we're living in a war zone." I've thought a lot about that in the days since . . .

There was a strong controversy not that long ago, as our hymnal was being compiled, regarding that old traditional hymn, "Onward Christian Soldiers". Do you remember? There were people who believed that that was far too militant, and that it wasn't representative of the attitude we ought to embody toward the world we inhabit. This week, I thought of Bill Scully's heartbreak over the trauma of gunfire after a high school football game right here in Kansas City, and all of a sudden it hit me how appropriate "Onward Christian Soldiers" really is. We are not involved in a battle of blood and bullets, but are very much engaged in a literal and figurative battle for the hearts and minds and very lives of our children.

It was Edmund Burke who said that all that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men (and women) to remain silent. Last week we discussed that we are saved by faith through grace. That statement is the bedrock - the foundation - of our faith as Christians; but according to James, faith is worthless if it is never put into action. Today I want to focus with you on an extraordinary exchange between Jesus and, of all people, a centurion. In this text is revealed a profoundly humble heart and servant spirit, ready to serve at the behest of God. The centurion said it this way: "I am one under authority." Are you? Look at that passage with me, please; it really is amazing. Jesus is in Capernaum. I have been there and have seen the ruins of the synagogue that the centurion actually used his own resources to build. This is a phenomenal story, particularly when set in the context of first century politics in Palestine. The Romans were an occupying force, hated and detested. They were seen as the rapists and pillagers of a nation and yet, there were among them those extraordinary characters who respected not only the Jewish nation, but its beliefs, and treated its people with kindness and compassion. That's the portrait that emerges of this centurion. Then came the encounter with Christ: "Jesus went with them", the scripture tells us, "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; therefore, I did not presume to come to you.’”

The passage demonstrates incredible humility in a man of amazing authority. The centurion would have functioned in that area almost like a governor; there would have been no one to override or veto his authority. And yet, when the itinerant preacher from Nazareth drew close, he sent emissaries to say, “Do not come into my home. I am unworthy of You.” Then he went on to elaborate on the nature of his relationships. Listen very carefully: He said, “For I 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.” When Jesus heard this, He was amazed and, turning to the crowd that followed him, He said, **“I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.”** For you see, the centurion not only approached Christ with complete humility, understanding Christ’s authority, but he placed his life, and the very life of his slave into the care of Christ.

Reading through the text, praying over it, and pondering it this past week, I have struggled with what it says in today’s culture, to a people who are often spectators; passive as the circumstances of the world enfold all around us. There are five truths I want to share with you. Even when we do not understand, we are called to trust in God; even when the way is difficult, we are called to follow His will and fight for the Kingdom, as those who are under authority. What does that mean? Let’s break it down together and consider this.

Perhaps you’ve been reading in the news about the Pat Tillman, and the tragedy that occurred in Afghanistan a couple of years ago. Pat Tillman was an NFL standout player who refused his contract - his multimillion dollar contract - in order to enlist in the service in response to 9/11. He was in Afghanistan, on patrol with his unit, which got separated when one of their Humvees broke down. As they had come under enemy fire earlier, there was certainly a heightened sense of the dangers in the area. Pat and one other person in his unit were attempting to flag down some help from an approaching convoy of allies when a mine or a remote-control bomb exploded, and, in the confusion, a firefight ensued. Pat Tillman was killed in this “friendly” fire.

When we hear the story, it breaks our hearts; that such an incredible patriot was cut down at the prime of his life, so senselessly. That’s part of the “fog of war” that is almost impenetrable. What is demonstrated in this particular case is the breakdown of command and control. Ideally, in these circumstances, there should be a chain of command that leads to someone, somewhere, who has the objectivity to provide witness and coordination to what is happening in the field.

It is no different in life. Sometimes I feel as if I’m mired in the “fog of war”; I can’t see beyond my hand. Have you ever been in fog so dense (as in London) that when you walk through it, you can’t see beyond just a few feet? There is almost a sense that the future is uncertain, and there is a thinly veiled terror in the encounter. That is how life feels sometimes. For instance, you get a call from your doctor, who says, “I have some bad

news.” Or perhaps, your spouse turns to you and says, “This really isn’t working.” Many of us have received a call from school, only to be told that one of our children is struggling. Sometimes the living of life is like walking through a dense fog; we are drawn into and mired in the “fog of war” and, like Job, we find ourselves questioning if there is a divine design to any of this.

That is why it is a leap of faith to trust in God, and it is a leap of faith that we make each and every day. It is evident in the small things we do. We get up in the morning, trusting that the sun will rise; trusting that there will be an opportunity for us to live in meaningful service that day. We drive on the highway (especially if it’s a two lane!) and it is a huge leap of faith to assume that the person in the oncoming lane is not going to swerve and strike our car or, worse yet, strike the vehicle transporting those we love. Life is a leap of faith.

Billy Graham, that giant in faith, shared in one of his books how he reached a point of crisis at a time in his life when he was trying to balance all of his doubts with what he knew to be true and believed, and he realized that there is ample evidence both ways. If you look for discouragement on a daily basis, you will find it; but if you are looking for evidence of God, I believe your eyes will be opened. Life is a leap of faith, and we choose to trust in God each and every day, even when the way is difficult.

Virginia Johnson, a good member of our congregation, passed on to me a letter written by her brother-in-law, John Lieb, a veteran of the Pacific air battles of World War II, to his children on the 50th anniversary of what he later dubbed his “Mission of Faith”. He wrote:

“On November 17, 1943, eleven planes of the 26th Squadron ran into trouble on a mission against Taroa Island in the Maloelap Islands of the Marshalls. And, again, the breaks were good.

Over the target we encountered intense enemy aircraft fire. Fifteen to eighteen zekes swarmed up to meet us, and all hell broke loose. (Pardon my “French” – it’s in the text!)

Our #4 engine was shot out. As I feathered the prop, Technical Sergeant Lewis T. Horton, our chief engineer, called on the interphone to say that a fire had started in the waist section of the plane.

I headed back for Canton. This island was used because the Japanese did not know we had taken off from Baker Island. The air was full of enemy fighters diving at us from every direction. Our gunners were unable to leave their posts to fight the fire - they were too busy fighting off enemy planes.

We saw one zeke go down in flames. Finally, the Japs began to fall back and we gradually outdistanced them but we were still in bad shape. The

fire had spread to the tail section of the plane and the control cables were so badly damaged they were in danger of giving way any minute and sending us spinning into the sea. One engine was out, our gas was low, and Canton seemed a million miles away.

Sergeant Horton never lost his head. Cans of fruit juice were opened and he passed them around and supervised the dousing of the fire with fruit juice. Then, with little more than the skin holding the tail section to the fuselage, Horton picked his way back and repaired the damaged cables and I managed to bring her back to base. . .”

Lt. Colonel Lieb goes on to write in his memoirs that as he was landing, he was not able to control the plane because the right landing gear had been shot out and the plane veered into some P40s that were placed alongside the runway. One of the many miracles of that night, he said, was that it didn't burst into flames and they didn't die.

I found it interesting that, in his devotion, he referenced Psalm 77. “I cried out to God for help, I cried out to God to hear me. When I was in distress, I sought the Lord.” This is what I know to be true. When tough times come upon us, our first thought is, “Why me? What did I ever do to deserve this?” And we play the blame game; we want to blame anybody else, and we wonder why we are facing the suffering that we must endure. Be clear about this: as Christians, we are not exempted from the pain and suffering of life. In fact, as you have heard me say, because our hearts are sensitized by Christ, I believe that we will suffer *more* than others who are indifferent to human suffering. So it is not a question of *if* suffering will touch your life; it is simply a question of *when*. But, (and I believe this with all my being), when the tough times come, when the difficult moments mire us in the muck of life, in those moments, I believe that God becomes most evident. C.S. Lewis said, “God whispers to us in our pleasures . . . but shouts in our pains”. It is in those moments of suffering that we become most attuned and aware of how God is lifting us up.

John Lieb described another of the “miracles” he experienced that fateful night of November 17th-18th, 1943, in his letter to his children. As he and his crew were attempting to navigate their way back to Baker Island, the radio beacon was transmitting, which was extraordinarily rare, due to the need to keep the Allied presence on the island secret from the Japanese. Further, the strict blackout dictates had been lifted for a brief period on that one night, because a critical cargo ship had to be unloaded. That light, and the brief transmission of the radio beacon (which had been turned on to signal *another* plane command on Baker knew was coming in) allowed the wounded bomber to find its way back to the island. Lt. Colonel Lieb referenced attempting to land without strong controls, because the tail was almost falling off the plane. He talked about the courage of his men who, in an effort to lighten the load as they were flying at 1,000 feet over the ocean, threw out their parachutes because they knew they were useless at that level. And he shared that they flew on in faith, and experienced God's presence in the most dramatic way imaginable. Here's the promise: God won't exempt you from the tough times, but He will be with you in and through them. So hold the course.

The fourth truth is this: follow His will. As I imagine this, it really is not rocket science; it is pretty simple. We are called to love God, and we are called to love one another. It's as if God has put us on a road (kind of like I-470), and if we follow the road it will get us to our destination, which is fulfillment in Christ. Further, it is almost as if God put rumble strips on the side of the road so that, when we begin to drift out of our lane, we are reminded to get back on course. When we drive, the rumble strip is there to keep us from going into the ditch, because if we go in to the ditch and hit the guardrail or the culvert, our lives may be ended. Our spiritual lives are no different; God has set a course for us, not to rob us of any joy of living, but to protect our lives for His loving. If we follow that path, as those under the authority of God, then we are entrusted to the task of living and loving on purpose, serving God.

Saving Private Ryan, with Tom Hanks, is, I hesitate to say, one of my favorite movies (It is so gruesome, but it is a brilliant movie!). There is some wonderful dialogue in the film. At one point, the men are talking about their mission and complaining. Captain Miller (Tom Hanks) is talking to one of his men, a Private named Ryan. Miller says, "I don't gripe to you. I don't gripe in front of you. You should know that, Private Ryan." "Sorry Sir", says the Private, "But let's say you weren't a Captain, or maybe I was a Major. What would you say then?" "In that case," Captain Miller said, "I'd say this is an excellent mission, Sir, with an extremely valuable objective, Sir, worthy of my best efforts, Sir. Moreover, I feel heartfelt sorrow for the mother of Private James Ryan, and I'm willing to lay down the lives of me and my men - especially you, Ryan - to ease her suffering." Brilliant! Now *that* is a sense of purpose! Remember the ending of that movie? Captain Miller has been wounded and is dying, and Private James Ryan comes to him, reaches out and grabs him, and do you remember what he said? He said, "Earn it!" That is so far different than what Christ did on the cross for us. Christ didn't look at us from the cross and say, "Earn it"; Christ looks to us from the cross and says, "Receive it". We have been given a gift - a sense of purpose and passion, a mission for life, a sense of faith, a sense of courage. . . And, because of that extraordinary gift, which Christ has given, we are empowered not to remain silent, mere spectators in life who watch the horrors unfold, but rather to rise and truly be willing to be Christian soldiers, so that our children, our children's children, and every generation that comes after us will not be at risk.

Today we have honored our veterans. Be very clear: we are not glorifying war. In fact, the veterans among us are most aware of and vehemently opposed *to* war, and see it only as a last resort, because they have witnessed firsthand the carnage and the horrors. We honor our veterans because of their sacrifice, for they have served as one under authority. The question the scripture asks of us today is, are we willing to do the same? Are we willing to serve as a disciples of Christ and allow Him to be the authority of our lives? Amen.

Will you pray with me? Lord God, on this day we honor the men and women who have served so sacrificially. We honor and celebrate the veterans who are present with us today. Lord, we remember and give thanks to those who never returned from battle, but

made the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf. Today Lord, inspired by their example, and by the witness of faith of the centurion - a man of war who made his life an offering of love and peace - we place our lives under Your authority and accept Your invitation to serve, in Your name. In Christ, Amen.