

I

At a wedding, we pastors get the best seat in the house. I get to stand right here at the end of the aisle as two people commit themselves to life in the covenant of Christian marriage.

One of the things I've noticed over the years is that during a wedding, I have enormous power in the moments leading up to the ceremony. Besides the couple, I am the one person in the room whose presence required for the solemnization the marriage.

But as soon as I pronounce the benediction, my power evaporates. The happy couple is busy greeting their friends and family, and I have become just another face in the crowd.

The power that I hold at a wedding is conditional and greatly variable.

II

Whether we're aware of it or not, all of us have some amount of power in our lives. Some of it comes by virtue of our jobs. Some of it comes by virtue of our relationships. Some of it comes simply by virtue of our demographics. Some of us have a great deal of power, and some have very little, but power, the authority and ability to make things happen, is a dynamic that is always at work in our lives, whether we're aware of it or not.

One of the running conversations we're having these days in our society is about power. Who has it? How did they

come by it? How do they exercise it, and in whose interests? Those are questions that are at the heart of our human relationships, and they're at the heart of two interrelated stories that are before us this morning in our story from the gospel of Luke.

III

This winter and spring, we're reading and preaching our way through the gospel of Luke, and when we come to our story for this morning, Jesus has returned once again to the village of Capernaum, a small fishing village on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Like all of the Land of Promise in those days, Capernaum was a village under occupation by a foreign empire. About few decades before the birth of Jesus, the Roman Empire had assumed control over the Mediterranean basin, and in order to ensure that the tax revenues kept rolling in and any hints of rebellion were quickly put down, Rome deployed its military throughout the land to enforce the peace with the tip of a spear.

And into this little village of Capernaum comes this rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth. And so I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from Luke 7:1-10.

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 also 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 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.

Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear

seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

The centurion of Capernaum and the widow of Nain. I think Luke places these two stories together because he wants us to look at them together.

The centurion was almost certainly the most powerful man in Capernaum. Much of his power came by virtue of his occupation as a Roman army officer in charge of 100 soldiers. In Capernaum, he was the visual embodiment of the most powerful military force on the face of the earth.

But apparently, that was not his only source of power. Apparently, even though he was a soldier serving a post far from home, he dealt kindly and respectfully with the villagers of Capernaum, so much so that they took it upon themselves to vouch for him with Jesus.

The centurion was apparently also wealthy enough to own at least one slave. It was common for Roman army officers to keep prisoners of war as slaves. We do not know whether or not that was the case with the slave in question in this story, but we do know that the centurion was powerful militarily, politically, and economically.

And then there is the widow of Nain, who was on her way to bury her only son. In those days and in that culture, women had very little power and hardly any legal rights of their own. There were no pension plans or social security programs. When the widow's only son died, not only did she grieve her only son, but her hope for any kind economic security in her golden years died with him.

Luke tells these two side by side with one another – one with all the power and privilege there could be, and one with hardly any whatsoever. And Jesus encounters them both.

In the case of the centurion, Jesus never actually meets him face to face. Their entire encounter is mediated via messengers. But nevertheless, Jesus is amazed at the centurion. I submit to you that what amazes Jesus is not the centurion's soliloquy on the chain of command, but his understanding of power, and his willingness to use it on behalf of someone who has hardly any. The centurion is the most powerful man in the village, but he treats Jesus with the utmost kindness and respect, declaring himself unworthy for Jesus to come to his home, even calling him Lord. The centurion was willing to lay down his own power and privilege for the benefit of someone who had none, and Jesus was amazed at him.

And then there is the widow mother, on her way out of the town gate to bury her only son, while Jesus is on his way in. Writer Max Lucado says you

should never invite Jesus to a funeral, because he interrupted every one he ever attended. When Jesus saw the mourning widow, he was moved in his guts. And so he used his power to stop the funeral procession.

Jesus touched the casket, which would have scandalized people, because Jewish purity laws forbade contact with dead bodies. But Jesus is always willing to touch the untouchable. Jesus is always willing to use his power to lift up the mourning, the poor, and the vulnerable. And so Jesus commanded the young man to rise, and then he gave him back to his mother.

The centurion and the widow. Two portraits of power. One with all the power in the world, one with nearly none, and Jesus meets them both.

IV

Who has power, and why? How is power exercised, and for whom? These are questions that are at the heart of our human relationships.

I don't know about you, my friend, but to me, the world in we live seems to meaner and crueller by the day. It seems like the mottos to live by in this world are might makes right, and strike first and strike fast and strike hard. The motto of this world seems to be you only go around once, so grab all the power you can get.

And to me, that's what makes the gospel so counter-cultural, and compelling, and even a little bit dangerous. Because the gospel says that

the way to upward mobility in the kingdom of God is on your knees. The gospel says that the way to take the highest seat at the table is to intentionally choose the lowest. The gospel says that the way to greatness in the kingdom of God is to become least of all and servant of all.

That is a message that is diametrically opposed to one that says that power is to be obtained at all costs and exercised only insofar as it will get you more power. That's a message that is diametrically opposed to one that says that nice guys finish last.

So here's the question for you, my friend. What are you going to do with the power that's been allotted to you? The centurion had all the power in the world, but he humbled himself before Jesus, so much so that Jesus was amazed at him. The widow had almost no power at all, but Jesus used his power over death to restore her hope. What will you do with yours this week? Will you use it for the unholy trinity of me, myself, and I? Or will you use it to build up the kingdom of God?

V

And what about us, as a community of faith? What about us, as the First Presbyterian Church of Athens?

By many measures, we are a powerful congregation. Many of us are leaders in business, in government, in the academy, in this community.

Dr. King once said that life's most urgent and persistent question is this – what are you doing for others?

So how will we exercise the considerable power that's been entrusted to us? For whom will we exercise it, and to what end?

What would it look like here in Athens, Georgia, if we laid down some of our power, picked up our crosses, and followed him, come what may?

Maybe, just maybe, Jesus would be amazed at us.

May it be so. Amen.