

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, the Second Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 4, June 2, 2013, dedicated to WIB Smith in thanksgiving for his trust and belief in our church staff, to the memory of John Zahn, who died early this morning, to all who have lost their lives and their homes in the tornados in Oklahoma, especially the people of Moore, who have been struck twice in two weeks, and always to the glory of God!

“Power and Authority to Pray and to Heal”

I Kings 8 , Luke 7:1-10

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Three men vested with power and authority speak to us from the pages of Holy Scripture today – King Solomon, a Roman centurion and our Messiah, Jesus the Christ. In each case, these men stand in the place where they rule and speak to and through the people with words and actions that can make or break people. They have power and authority to heal or hurt. If we listen carefully to their voices, we will discern how power and authority can build up and heal as opposed to destroying and tearing down.

In I Kings 8, we find a chapter long prayer by King Solomon for the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. Solomon, son of David,

is the third King of Israel. He is best known for his wisdom and his building projects – first among them this holy temple. In Solomon’s temple, golden Cherubim guard the Ark of the Covenant which contain the two tablets of the Ten Commandments. It is an elaborate house of worship with 10 golden tables and candlesticks, brass vats, bronze tanks and a golden altar of incense. It was considered the most beautiful temple of its time. In our times, the Temple Mount and the western wall – all that remain of Solomon’s temple and they are considered one of the holiest places on earth for Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

It is on the Temple Mount that we meet King Solomon as he prays in 960 BCE. This chapter long prayer is more than a prayer of dedication for an ornate building. Solomon prays for God’s blessings on him as king, for his people in their relations with neighbors, for forgiveness in their sins against God and one another, for protection and sustenance when there is famine in the land, for the soldiers in battle and captives in war as they are carried away to foreign lands that their captivity and return to the homeland may be blessed by God. This is a prophetic precursor to the Babylonian exile. He also prays for the people of Israel – that they follow the commandments and statues brought forth by Moses from the Sinai Desert and be faithful followers of the one true God.

But most significantly, in the end, Solomon’s prayer reaches beyond the boundaries of nation, culture and Jewish faith. With the focus on the foreigners in verse 41-43, Solomon asks for God’s clarity and courage in their relations with those who come to the land because of “they have heard of God” and have come to worship God in the temple. He knows that people will come when they hear of our one God. He asks God to hear the prayers of the foreigners as well and help the people of Israel welcome them into the temple.

In the end, Solomon does a radical thing. He acknowledges that God does not actually dwell in the Temple but can be found wherever people call him by name. This is huge. Think of this! The people of Israel have just spent tons of time, talent and treasure building up the temple and Solomon concludes by saying

that God will dwell where God will dwell (See also Dt. 12:5). Or as Jesus says, “The temple of the Lord is within you.”

The wisdom of this leader is acknowledging that God places himself where God chooses to be and to go. In other words, God has “naming rights” to the temple and to each one of our lives. This is not the Solomon Center. This king sees the fullness of God and gives God the glory on this day in which all shining gold could make him believe he was in charge. This beautiful prayer links heaven to earth and earth to heaven and wraps the people of God with a protective blanket of God’s presence now and into the future. Wise leaders point to the power and authority of God. Solomon shows his true wisdom.

In Luke 7:1-10, Jesus does a long distance healing of the centurion’s slave because of the non-believer’s faith. Think of this! This most powerful Roman military leader in the region is different than his peers. He has built a synagogue for the Jews. He worships God. Although he hasn’t converted to the faith (he still has to go through a few more new member classes) - he believes in one God. In a society that treats slaves like trash (yes, they literally throw them out to the curb when they are sick) this centurion cares for his slave and wants him to be healed.

We never meet the centurion. Instead, he sends his intermediaries to deal with Jesus. The centurion’s belief in Jesus’ power to heal is carried forth to Jesus through Jewish elders and Gentile friends. He asks Jesus to come. But he has second thoughts as he worries about defiling Jesus should Jesus enter his pagan home to heal his slave. So, through his Gentile friends, he asks Jesus to heal from a distance. It works. Jesus uses his healing power to pray the slave back to health.

Do you see what’s happening?

The centurion glimpsed in Jesus a power and authority he had never seen before. He came to faith without even meeting Jesus or hearing him speak. He had *heard about Jesus* and that was enough for him. While we may dance in and out of our beliefs and

bounce around with all our questions (yes, I do believe doubt is good!) - here is a powerful man who does not see and does not even hear, but believes. This man can wipe out whole villages and destroy cities – in time his legion was probably even involved in the 70 AD destruction of Solomon’s Temple. But he knows power and authority when he SENSES it. And he yields to the non-violent leader of his times. He yields to love.

How about us? How do we use our power and authority? Do we use it for our own benefit? Do we use it help the poor who are right outside and seeking to be inside God’s beautiful temple we call OUR church? Do we use our power and authority to advocate for and encourage those who are vulnerable? Are we willing to lay it aside for the sake of others? Can we see Jesus’ power and authority in our attitudes and behaviors toward others? Do our words heal or hurt? Do they build up or tear down? Are we willing to face criticism when we do the right thing - the “JESUS” thing - for those around us?

Or do we silently stand aside in our power and authority and watch others suffer and perhaps even die? In the end, the one with true power and authority is not you or me. Dare I say, it is not even Jesus? Jesus will tell you - it is God. We can stand by and fail to stand up to what we know is wrong. Or, we can stand up and stand with those who are in need of God’s healing touch and presence. But, remember - as the abolitionist proclaimed so long ago and Dr. King echoed from the mountaintop of justice - the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice. As wise King Solomon acknowledged on the day of dedication for God’s temple – God will dwell where God chooses to dwell. Let’s be God’s holy temples in this world and allow God to dwell in us, and through us, may God heal the world. Amen.