Luke 7:1-10

“How Deep is Your Faith?”

There was a struggling fortune five hundred company that had recently hired a new CEO. Specifically, he was hired to cut costs, and get rid of excess employees. Believing there was a great deal of overpaid employees, he decided on his very first day, to take a walk with his new board through the offices to see if he could spot any slackers. Upon entering a large area of cubicles, the new CEO spotted a man who was simply leaning against a wall, doing nothing.

The CEO rubbed his hands in delight; now he would show everyone, especially his board that he meant business. The CEO, followed by his board, stormed over to where the man was leaning against the wall. The CEO asked, “How much money do you make?” The surprised man replied, “About $400 a week.” The CEO pulled out his wallet counted out $1600 dollars or four weeks of wages, handed to the man and said, “Here is four weeks’ wages. I want you out of here.” And with that the man immediately left.

Satisfied with himself, he turned to the manager of the cubicle littered office and said, “By the way, what did that man do here?” The manager replied, “Nothing! He was the delivery man from Domino’s Pizza”. Sometimes we can “jump the gun” in thinking we understand a situation, and think we can manipulate circumstances to our own benefit. However, most of the time, we are forced to negotiate solutions.

It is truly surprising, when you think about it, how much negotiating we do in our lives, without really thinking it is negotiating. A child is told it is bed time, only to have that same child say, “Just a few more minutes. Let me stay up and I’ll eat my vegetables tomorrow.” We negotiate at work, at home, at the store, all over the place. At the very heart of negotiating is a concept that we are well acquainted with.

You may have heard of it in a legal drama on television. In most negotiations there is in operation the concept of *quid pro quo*. Sounds fancy doesn’t it? Actually, it is a Latin phrase that literally translated means simply “this for that”. We know it more intimately as “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine.” We may also refer to it as “give or take”. Quid pro quo means that there is an exchange of material goods, or services, of equal value, or near equal value.

Money is actually a quid pro quo agreement, as we exchange dollars to pay for things. In legal circles, contracts come under question when one side seems to be getting a greater advantage from an agreement, or one side fails to meet its promised requirements. In political terms, quid pro quo refers to doing a favour for a politician in exchange for favourable legislation or patronage appointments.

Senator Mike Duffy is a good example. He was appointed to the Senate primarily because he was a major fund raiser for the Conservative Party. On the darker side there are quid pro quo arrangements that we call blackmail or harassment, where people are forced to do something by those with power or leverage over them.

It may be surprising to learn that as Jesus enters the town of Capernaum, he walks right into the middle of quid pro quo at work. Luke 7 begins a section of the gospel where Jesus encounters different groups of people, and we get to see how each group received him. The story before us today is essentially this. In Capernaum, there was a Roman officer who clearly was the man entrusted with maintaining the peace in Capernaum.

His responsibilities would have included law and order, keeping the rebel zealots at bay, and making sure taxes were collected. There is the old proverb that fits most situations of foreign occupation, “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”. In many cases, it is known that officers in similar circumstances in the Roman Empire, would abuse their positions of power.

Specifically, they would take advantage of the local population, and go beyond their authority and mandate. In crass terms, they were thugs who had their own personal army; namely the men under their command. This particular officer in Capernaum was different, however.

We know this because of the first delegation that came to meet Jesus. The delegation was made up of Jewish leaders or elders. Now I should be clear that these men are not Pharisees or religious leaders, but rather the men who directed the everyday life of Capernaum. The closest concept we might have today is a Municipal Council. It is clear that these elders had a positive relationship with this unnamed Roman officer.

At issue was a slave, that the Roman officer had, that meant a great deal to the officer. Why the slave meant a great deal to the officer is not explained, but the slave was important. We can surmise that all known medical efforts were tried to help the slave, but he was fading fast. Jesus was well known by this point as a healer, and through the network of informants, the officer would have had, Jesus was known to be coming to Capernaum. Perhaps, thought the officer, Jesus could help the slave.

The reason a delegation was sent, instead of the officer coming himself, has to do with the Law of Moses. Jesus was seen by many people, Jewish and Gentile, as a Rabbi or teacher of the law. That being said, it was believed that like most teachers of the law, Jesus would want no contact with a Gentile. Contact with Gentiles was considered by many religious leaders as a violation of the law, and it made a person ritually unclean.

Clearly, this officer had a good understanding of Jewish customs and beliefs, and he did not want to offend Jesus. Especially, if there was any hope of helping his beloved slave. This is where the quid pro quo comes into play. I suspect that the officer called in the elders for a meeting. He explained the situation with his slave, and the close proximity of Jesus, and asked them to speak on his behalf to avoid offending Jesus.

Furthermore, it is probable that the officer would have reminded the elders of his positive approach to the community, including building a synagogue for them. In other words, I scratched your back, now I need you to scratch my back; quid pro quo. Wishing to keep the relationship positive, the elders agree to go to Jesus, and plead his case.

Now, it is very important that we notice how the elders try to convince Jesus to help. The strategy is logical, and one we would have likely used ourselves. The elders realize that Jesus is under no compulsion to help the Roman officer. Why would he? Why would a Jewish person, a Rabbi, help a Gentile, and a Roman occupier to boot? Jesus owed Capernaum nothing, and he owed the elders and officer nothing as well.

What leverage could they use to sway Jesus? The only leverage that might work is an appeal to quid pro quo. The Roman officer has been good to the Jewish people in Capernaum, so perhaps Jesus out of a loyalty to the Jewish people would do this one favour for him. It is a good, sound argument. The elders appeal to Jesus’ sense of nationalism, and his love of the Jewish people, and maybe even his stated purpose of coming to serve and save the Jewish people.

The bible says, “Jesus went with them”. It would appear, at first, as if the quid pro quo argument worked. The elders had successfully negotiated with the Messiah and won. Jesus had been lobbied, and agreed to the terms presented to him. That is how this situation appears, but that is not what is going on. The plot thickens as Jesus approaches the officer’s home. Word reaches the officer that Jesus, responded positively to the elder’s request, and is coming to his home, and the officer panics.

Still trying not to offend the Jews, and Jesus, he sent a group of friends this time, to intercept Jesus. Please note, through all this drama, at no time does the officer actually come face to face with Jesus. The officer clearly respects Jesus, knows what Jesus is capable of, and wants to assure nothing interrupts this opportunity to save the beloved slave. Clearly the officer would do anything to save this slave.

The officer’s friends, the second delegation of this story, speak to Jesus on behalf of the officer, and something amazing happens. This story changes dramatically away from being about quid pro quo. It is no longer about exchanging a favour, or doing a kind thing for the slave because the officer is so good to the Jews of Capernaum. Listen carefully to what the officer wants communicated to Jesus.

Be assured that the officer chose his words very carefully, and his friends would have faithfully passed them onto Jesus. “Just say the word from where you are, and my servant will be healed. I know because I am under the authority of my superior officers, and I have authority over my soldiers. I only need to say, ‘Go,’ and they go, or ‘Come,’ and they come. And if I say to my slaves, ‘Do this or that,’ they do it.”

At first you may be scratching your head wondering what all this ordering of soldiers is all about, but it reveals the nature of the officer’s heart. The officer knows that he cannot bargain with Jesus. The Jewish elders thought they could bargain with Jesus, but in actual fact they could not. There are no words, no strategies, and no material goods that could have swayed Jesus. The Jews don’t get it, but the Gentile officer does.

The Gentile officer is a soldier, and he understands that this situation with Jesus is all about authority. All about who is in control and who is calling the shots?

The officer is someone whose whole adult life is governed by authority. When he is given an order by his superior, his is not to question it, but simply execute the order; the same for the men under his command. He gives an order for them to come here, or go there, and it is to be done without question. You cannot negotiate with authority. It is what it is. It is the chain of command.

The officer knows he cannot compel Jesus in this matter, but he also knows that Jesus has the authority to heal this slave. Jesus has shown this already by healing others. The officer knows, for a lack of a better word, that he is at the mercy of Jesus. He on behalf of his slave, are in need of grace. They don’t deserve Jesus’ help, they are not owed Jesus’ help, but if Jesus wants to heal the slave he has the authority to do it.

Jesus is clearly amazed by the officer’s words. The Jewish elders tried to negotiate with Jesus as equals, but the Gentile officer humbles himself, recognizing his dependence. The officer exercises faith, acknowledging the authority of Jesus; and that in this matter of healing the slave, Jesus is clearly in charge. In the matter of healing the slave, Jesus answers to nobody. He is the final authority.

The demonstration of faith is even more striking, when the officer suggests a course of action for Jesus. “Just say the word from where you are!” No need to take any further time or effort to come closer to the sick slave. You don’t need to be within a certain distance to heal him, because you have authority. Just say the word! Now listen to what Jesus says about this officer. “I tell you, I haven’t seen faith like this in all the land of Israel.” The Gentile officer has shown more faith than the Jews.

As we know, the story concludes with the officer’s friends returning to his house, and finding the slave completely healed. The officer’s faith in the authority of Jesus is confirmed. Jesus does have the authority. His word is enough. This is a critical matter for us, this concept of authority. We talked recently about our cultures disdain for authority. How we do not like recognizing authority, or respecting it.

We are far more comfortable negotiating, setting up a quid pro quo agreement. That being said, we must also acknowledge that we think we can bargain with God. We have the audacity to believe we have anything God wants or needs. We erroneous believe we have a place to stand in our negotiations. Perhaps you are thinking, “I don’t do that. I don’t negotiate or bargain with God.” Really; you honestly believe that?

Think about it for moment. How many times in our moments of distress like what the Roman officer experienced, do we focus our prayers on what we have done. “Dear God, I have taught Sunday school, attended church regularly, given lots of money to charity and I have been a good person. So, God, how about helping me out? How about healing me, or my loved one, or giving me the money I need.” Quid pro quo.

The truth is, God owes us nothing. We can never buy his favour or earn his mercy. We dishonour him by believing that we are somehow on equal footing in this cosmic bargaining. What is needed in our lives is less bargaining and more humility.

What is needed is less strategizing, and more recognition of Christ’s authority. What is needed, is the full recognition, that what we need is for Jesus to simply speak the word, because he is the one who can. Jesus is the one who can speak a word into our illness and bring healing. Jesus is the one who can speak the word into our grief and bring comfort. Jesus is the one who can speak a word into our material needs, and bring us hope. By his word, and his word alone, great things happen.

These great things that happen come not because of our negotiating skills, not because of some quid pro quo agreement, but simply and most assuredly out of his grace. Perhaps we could take our cue from the Masai tribe in West Africa who has a very unusual way of saying thank you. When the Masai express thanks, they bow, and put their foreheads on the ground, and say, “My head is in the dirt.”

When members of another African tribe want to express gratitude, they sit for a long time in front of the hut of the person who did the favour and literally say, “I sit on the ground before you.” These Africans understand well what thanksgiving is and why it’s difficult for many of us: for at its core, thanksgiving is an act of humility. (Fresh Illustrations for preaching, p. 206)

God in Christ has full authority over everything in heaven and on earth, including you and me. Our response is to put our heads on the ground, so to speak; to humble ourselves. To recognize our great need and our full reliance on Christ, who with a single word, can change our lives. Praise be to him!