

Sunday, June 2, 2013: Luke 7:1-10

by [E. Louise Williams](#) in the [May 29, 2013](#) issue

As the president of DIAKONIA World Federation, I had come to Fiji to make a presentation at the DIAKONIA Asia-Pacific conference. “The traditional welcome ceremony will begin soon,” our hostess said, and she ushered me into a lovely room where I quickly showered and changed into a skirt.

I was looking forward to a ceremony that would welcome members from Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Indonesia and was shocked to learn that the purpose of the ceremony was to welcome me as a visiting dignitary. Fijian men and women sat on the floor while visiting deaconesses and deacons were offered chairs. I was escorted to a place of honor at the front and sat on several beautiful woven grass mats.

A professor from the local seminary gave me hints on what to do when and made traditional responses on my behalf. There were lengthy speeches that I did not understand except for the occasional “Louise Williams” and “DIAKONIA.”

Then kava was prepared in a large wooden bowl, with the powder (ground plant roots) mixed and remixed with water to achieve a milky grey drink. One of the men handed me a small bowlful and my guide whispered that I was to drink it all. Then bowls were passed around to everyone. Several groups performed traditional music and I was presented with gifts—mats, pottery urns, purses and fans, bottles of skin ointment, a shark’s tooth and a bundle of kava roots.

Whenever I traveled during my eight years as president of DIAKONIA, I was always warmly welcomed (although never quite as royally as in Fiji). While I do not regard myself as a prestigious person, I realized I could easily get used to this special treatment. It would be a short step from receiving such treatment to thinking I was entitled to it. I could understand how someone might then want to cling to one’s position of prestige, power and authority.

Authority and power have a primary place in the story of Jesus and the centurion; in fact authority is a recurring theme throughout Luke’s Gospel.

Roman centurions were accustomed to trading on their authority and power. They could command their servants and order those under them to do whatever they wished. They could enhance their own honor by associating with important people. And when they did a favor for someone, they knew they could ask for one in return. It was the culture of the day, and they had a place of authority in it.

The centurion's first approach to Jesus regarding his sick servant was exactly what one would expect in such a society. The centurion had been generous to the Jews in Capernaum and had even financed their new synagogue. Now, in return, he asked their leaders to approach Jesus on his behalf. It was an honor to Jesus to have such important people make the request and to have them name the centurion as someone worthy of Jesus' favor.

But then, just when the centurion was ready to receive a home visit from someone who would enhance his prestige and who had a reputation for healing—he sent a second unexpected message. First, the centurion confessed his own unworthiness. Second, he asked Jesus not to come to his house. Some interpret this dis-invitation as a kind gesture meant to protect Jesus from the ritual defilement that would result from entering a gentile's house. But Jesus seemed to see the gesture as something more: a confession of faith.

Jesus had the authority and power to heal from a distance. If the centurion's word could cause people to do his will, Jesus' word could restore a servant to health. Jesus did not judge the centurion's status, his worthiness or unworthiness. Jesus saw his faith and called it greater than any he'd found in all of Israel.

The centurion took the lower place, and Jesus praised him for it. This Roman gentile had grasped something that Jesus' own disciples were having difficulty understanding. Jesus went on to teach about authentic authority, which is countercultural—it is about becoming the last, the least and the servant of all. Jesus also demonstrated this ministry, especially in associating with those who had the least honor. Finally, Jesus gave his life as the means of giving life to the world.

The centurion glimpsed in Jesus an authority that was like no other authority he'd seen, and he came to faith without ever meeting Jesus or hearing him speak. He *had heard about* Jesus. This is an encouragement to us whenever we doubt the power of our words. Our witness to Jesus Christ can be powerful indeed.

Equally powerful is the witness of a disciple who understands Jesus' approach to power and authority. In recent months we've seen such a witness in Pope Francis, who has eschewed the trappings of his office and chosen to live simply and to be seen as servant of those who are most vulnerable and least powerful. Like Jesus, he has been criticized for stepping outside the bounds of the tradition.

Those of us who have a privileged place in church or society must ask ourselves about our own power and authority. Do we use it for our own benefit? Do we use it in service as an advocate for and to encourage those who are vulnerable? Are we willing to lay it aside for the sake of others? How do we witness to Jesus' authority by our attitudes and behavior? If we aim to echo Jesus' power given for others, and if we're willing to face the criticism that may come when we do the unexpected, then we may influence the life of someone who *hears* about Jesus through our witness.