

The Third Sunday after Epiphany
St. Matthew 8:1-13: "Unworthy Though I Am"
January 20/21, 2018 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Unworthy though I am, O Savior, yet You are faithful. You have promised that whoever comes to You in humble repentance and faith, You will never cast out (Jn. 6:37). Grant me such humility and confidence in Your promises, so that I am blessed like the leprous man, the centurion, and all the saints. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the eighth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

When [Jesus] came down from the mountain, great crowds followed Him. And behold, a leper came to Him and knelt before Him, saying, "Lord, if You will, You can make me clean." / And Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof to them." / When He entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to Him, appealing to Him, "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly." / And He said to him, "I will come and heal him." / But the centurion replied, "Lord, I am not worthy to have You come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man 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 servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." / When Jesus heard this, He marveled and said to those who followed Him, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." / And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; let it be done for you as you have believed." And the servant was healed at that very moment. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who is worthy of eternal praise, dear fellow redeemed:

Much had changed since Jacob left his father's house to travel to the land of his uncle. He had gone there for two reasons: first, his brother Esau wanted to kill him after he deceitfully took Esau's blessing, and second, he was hoping to find a wife there like his father had before him. When he left, Jacob was poor and alone, but as he made his way back, he brought with him a large family and great riches. He recognized that these tremendous blessings had come from the LORD. In prayer he said to God, "I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant" (Gen. 32:10).

But even though he recognized his unworthiness, he still was not shy about holding God to His promises. The night before he would encounter his brother Esau, a mysterious man engaged him in a wrestling match. Their struggle continued until daybreak, when the man wanted to leave. Jacob said, *"I will not let you go unless you bless me"* (v. 26). The man consented and blessed him. Jacob had wrestled with God and prevailed. Jacob was not worthy of this blessing, but through faith he received it.

I

The same was true of the leper in today's text. Leprosy was a terrible disease of the skin. It was very contagious and deadly. When a person was found to have leprosy, he was required to leave his family and home and join a community of other lepers. It was a depressing and painful existence, and there was little hope for healing. What leverage could a man like this apply to Jesus? How could he convince Jesus that he was worth healing? He could do nothing but fall before Him and say, *"Lord, if You will, You can make me clean."*

He did not list off all the things he would do for Jesus if he were healed. He did not promise Him a reward. Nor did he express doubt that Jesus was even able to do what he asked. He said, *"Lord, if You want, you can"* – not *"If you are able, please do."* This man acknowledged that he was entirely unworthy of Jesus' help. At the same time, He expressed an unyielding faith and hope that Jesus could.

Then Jesus did something totally unexpected. If this were depicted in a movie, I am almost sure it would be shown in slow motion. Jesus reached out His hand and touched the leprous man. Anyone watching would have recoiled in horror. *"Don't touch him, Jesus! He is unclean! You might catch what he has!"* But the opposite happened. The pure did not become impure; rather, the impure became pure. *"Be clean,"* said Jesus, and the leprosy immediately went away. In total humility, the man dared to ask for mercy, and he received it. He was cleansed.

This is exactly what happened at your baptism. Your parents or guardians brought you to the cleansing waters of the font because you were unclean. You were afflicted by something even worse than leprosy; you were full of sin. And while leprosy destroys physical health, sin destroys spiritual health. If sin is not addressed by the divine Physician, it results in eternal death. The motto of all who are brought to the font could well be the hymn verse, *"Nothing in my hand I bring, / Simply to the cross I cling; / Naked, come to Thee for dress, / Helpless, look to Thee for grace. / Foul, I to the fountain fly – / Wash me, Savior, or I die!"* (ELH 286, v. 3).

We come to baptism unclean, helpless, foul, but Jesus is not repulsed by us. He looks upon us with mercy, and through His Word, He touches us with divine grace. At the prayer of parents and sponsors, *"Lord, if You will, You can cleanse this child,"* Jesus replies, *"I will; be clean."* And the child is clean. He is washed in Jesus' blood and covered in Jesus' righteousness.

That is what the Lord did for each and every one of you. Through baptism, you have been freed from the leper community and incorporated into the family of God. You are no longer far off, separated from God. You have been *"brought near by the blood of Christ"* (Eph. 2:13). In Him, you and all baptized believers are *"holy and without blemish"* (5:27).

But that does not mean all your cares and trials are now over. The devil and the old Adam in you do not want you to remain in Christ. They want you to doubt God's Word and to imagine that you are entitled to worldly success and happiness. They want you to question God's love when bad things happen. These temptations will not stop as long as you live in this fallen world. In heaven is pure bliss, but in the world, you have trouble (Jn. 16:33).

II

Trouble came to the centurion in today's text too. One of his highly valued servants had been paralyzed and was *"suffering terribly."* Why did God let this happen? The centurion may have wondered this particularly because he had tried to live a life pleasing to God. He had rejected the false religion of the Romans and humbly listened to the Scriptures. The Jewish elders in that place begged Jesus to help, saying of the centurion that *"He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue"* (Lk. 7:4-5).

Did this make the centurion worthy? Did Jesus owe it to him to grant his request? Nowhere in the Bible are we told that God will give us what we ask if we somehow prove ourselves worthy. But perhaps the elders said this so that Jesus, a fellow Jew, would even consider assisting this Gentile. The Jews and Gentiles were not natural allies and friends. Even Jesus declared at a later point, *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"* (Mt. 15:24). But on this occasion Jesus said, *"I will come and heal him."*

Before he reached the centurion's home, the centurion sent friends to deliver this message on his behalf (Lk. 7:6), *"Lord, I am not worthy to have You come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed."* What faith he had! He freely acknowledged his unworthiness. He knew that according to the law of the Israelites, Jesus should not enter the home of a Gentile. He deserved nothing from Jesus, but like the leprous man before him, he boldly called on Jesus to do what only the promised Messiah could do – *"only say the word, and my servant will be healed."*

Now, Jesus was impressed. *"Truly, I tell you,"* He said, *"with no one in Israel have I found such faith."* What does that tell us? It says that just because we have the right bloodline, just because we have God's Word at hand, does not mean we will be most faithful. It is easy to hide behind these things and become prideful about externals. But faith is not built into DNA; it is not inherited like our personal traits. And salvation is not assured us simply because we belong to the right church and put offerings in the plate.

Faith and salvation are brought to us and applied to us by the Holy Spirit through God's means of grace. We do not earn them, but we can lose them. So we humbly confess our weaknesses and sins; we acknowledge our unworthiness. And Jesus grants our request for mercy just as He granted mercy to the centurion and his servant.

The centurion said that in his position of authority, he would *"say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."* In His position of authority—all authority in heaven and on earth—Jesus also says to those under Him, *"Go," "Come,"* and *"Do this."*

He says, *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you"* (Mt. 28:19-20).

Our Lord's saving Word and Sacraments are for "all nations," for Jews and Gentiles. He invites all to believe and receive His grace. He says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28), and "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink" (Jn. 7:37). And for their spiritual nourishment, Jesus says, "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (1Cor. 11:25). He gives His body and blood to baptized believers "for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt. 26:28).

Through the preaching of His Word, through Baptism and His Holy Supper, Jesus reaches out to touch you with His grace and life. He does not avoid you because of your unclean, sinful state. He does not overlook you because you have the wrong background. **Unworthy Though You Are**, He comes to you to forgive and strengthen and bless.

You cannot make yourself worthy of His presence and gifts. He makes you worthy to be His own by the power of the Holy Spirit. In His grace we have comfort and a confident faith, as the hymnwriter says, "Unworthy though I am, O Savior, / Because I have a sinful heart, / Yet Thou Thy lamb wilt banish never, / For Thou my faithful Shepherd art" (ELH 313, v. 3).

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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