

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany – Pr. Faugstad sermon
St. Matthew 8:1-13: “Jesus Welcomes the Outsiders.”
January 21/22, 2023 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

+ + +

Lord God, heavenly Father, we praise You that You have bestowed upon us Your saving Word, through which Your Holy Spirit has enlightened our understanding and sanctified our wills. We pray that Your Word may have free course in the lives and hearts of multitudes from east to west, that Your house may be filled with believers out of every nation and tribe, and that heaven and earth may ring with songs of praise for this great salvation; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (adapted from *Altar Prayers for the Church Year* by Clemens H. Zeidler, p. 32)

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. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, through whom we are Abraham’s offspring, heirs not by blood but by faith in our Lord’s promises, dear fellow redeemed:

It’s about time for church to start. You hear the door open and turn to look. Who would you most like to see walk through that door? Maybe it’s someone you haven’t seen in a while—a member of your family, a childhood friend, a co-worker, a neighbor. You make room next to you and motion them over. What a great surprise!

But is there anyone you would not want to see walk through that door? That's a tough question. In general, we say that everyone is welcome at our churches. We want everyone to hear the truth and learn what Jesus has done for them. But some people have hurt us, sometimes very deeply. Even seeing them can bring back all the pain. We might think in our hearts that people like that do not belong in our churches. They can go somewhere else, but not here.

This shows how our love has limits. It is an imperfect love because our sin is mixed in with it. We keep inside ourselves a certain amount of bitterness, a certain amount of prejudice, against individuals or groups of people because of experiences we have had with them. We might say that we could never respect a person who supports a cause or a candidate that we totally disagree with. Or we might condemn all the members of a social class or people of a different nationality that we think only care about themselves. Or we justify our lack of love toward someone because of the wrongs he or she has done to us.

All of these things come not from a strong sense of righteousness and justice, but from our own pride. Our pride keeps us from the self-sacrificing, generous life that God calls us to live. When we read about Jesus in the Gospels, we see the contrast so clearly between how we should be and how we actually are.

In today's Gospel reading, a man with a terrible, contagious skin disease knelt before Jesus begging Him to cleanse him. Lepers like this man were outcasts, banished to live in their own colonies. They had to announce their status—"unclean!"—whenever they came near people without leprosy. Probably quite a few people looked down on these lepers. They pitied their condition maybe, but they still stayed as far away as they could. I'm sure we would have too.

But when the man came up to Jesus, Jesus did not keep His distance. He could have just spoken a word and healed the man like He did with the centurion's servant. But in this case, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched the man! No one could have seen that coming. It was something that non-leprous people simply didn't and wouldn't do. Why risk being infected with the same disease?

When Jesus reached across that great divide toward His suffering neighbor, it could be that the man shied away. He was not used to a compassionate action like this. He didn't want Jesus to get what He had. And then suddenly his leprosy wasn't there anymore. His skin was clean! Jesus directed this outsider to come back in, to show himself to the priest and return to his home and family.

Going on a little further, Jesus was met by the friends of a centurion who appealed for help for the centurion's servant who had been paralyzed. This request was surprising. Why would any Roman military commander ask a Jewish man like Jesus for help? The Jews resented the Romans for their occupation of Judea and Galilee, and the Romans acted like a ruling party acts. But this centurion was different. The evangelist Luke tells us that he treated the people with kindness and supplied the funds they needed to build a synagogue in Capernaum (7:5).

Even so, Jesus was under no obligation to help the centurion's servant. The centurion was a Gentile, and Jesus had come for "*the lost sheep of the house of Israel*" (Mat. 15:24). But just as He had compassion on the leprous man, He had compassion here too. After the centurion

expressed his confidence that Jesus could heal his servant without even coming into the house where the servant was, Jesus said, *"Go; let it be done for you as you have believed."*

And Jesus said something else, something that applies directly to you and me today, thousands of years after that miracle in Capernaum. Jesus said, *"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."* Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are those patriarchs through whom the promise came. The LORD told them, *"in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"* (Gen. 12:3; 28:14).

"All the families of the earth" is all-inclusive. The many who *"will come from east and west"* means people from around the world. It is not just the blood descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is all those who share the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who believe as they did in a Savior who takes away the sins of the world.

Jesus emphasized this again after His resurrection. He told His disciples, *"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"* (Mat. 28:19-20). Jesus wants all the people of the world to know that His saving work was done for them. He was anointed at His Baptism to be their Savior. He was driven to the cross and shed His blood for their sins. He rose from the dead in triumph over their death.

He wants everyone from east to west to know that He has removed their transgressions from them *"as far as the east is from the west"* (Psa. 103:12). The apostle Paul brings it right home to you and me. Like the leper and the centurion, we were outcasts, outsiders. Most of us have no family line running back through Israel. We are part of the great mass of Gentiles, a bunch of nobodies whom very few will remember after we are gone.

But we matter to God. We are not strangers to Jesus. When He went to the cross, He was carrying your sins. He had your bitterness and prejudice slapping Him in the face. He was pierced by your pride. He felt all the world's anger and hatred and animosity directed toward Him. And yet He still said, *"Father, forgive them. I love them. I will die for them, to save their souls."*

Paul writes, *"[I]n Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ"* (Eph. 2:13). His blood reconciled you with the holy God. His blood cleansed you at your Baptism and cleanses you through His Supper. It makes and keeps you His blood brother. You were an outsider, but you aren't one anymore. *"[F]or in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ"* (Gal. 3:26-27).

You are a member of the body of Christ, wearing the clothes of His righteousness, no more stained by your sin. And there is room for more sinners like you. There is room for murderers, adulterers, robbers, and liars—sins that all of us have committed in our hearts if not by our actions. There is room in Christ's body for northerners, southerners, easterners, and westerners. There is room for your closest friends. There is room for your fiercest enemies.

As soon as we have understood that our salvation comes only by the grace of God, we can't begrudge that salvation to anyone else. We don't deserve it any more than they do. If in our pride we think that we belong in Christ's kingdom more than others do, then we need to hear Jesus' warning that *"the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness."* He was speaking about the Israelites who thought their connection to Abraham's family tree was the most important thing. What they ignored was Abraham's humble faith.

We, too, will lose our salvation if we trust in our connection to other faithful people in our church or in our family, instead of daily repenting of our sin and trusting in Jesus alone for forgiveness and life. Like that leper, we must admit that by nature we are unclean, sinful in our thoughts, words, and actions. Like the centurion's servant, we are paralyzed if left to ourselves, suffering terribly.

We are not worthy to have Jesus love us. Our welcome gift for Him when He took on our flesh was anguish and cross. We sent Him to His death because of our sin. And He went forward willingly. He had mercy upon us. We were His enemies, but He called us friends. We were outsiders, and He welcomed us in.

He shows us the way we should be toward those who have hurt us and those who are nothing like us. We look upon them not with hatred but with love, not in judgment but with compassion. As Jesus meets us in His Word and Sacraments to heal us from past hurts, He also helps us to set aside our anger and grow in love toward those around us.

Then we begin to see others as He sees us, as poor sinners in need of forgiveness, as hurting souls in need of grace and mercy. Jesus did not give up on us, and He doesn't want us to give up on others. **Jesus Welcomes the Outsiders**, outsiders like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, outsiders like you and me, and more outsiders from east and west—even many we would not expect.

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.

+ + +