

The Third Sunday after Epiphany, A ✕ D 2009

Matthew 8:1-13 When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. ² And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." ³ And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. ⁴ 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." ⁵ When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, ⁶ "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly." ⁷ And he said to him, "I will come and heal him." ⁸ 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." ⁹ 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." ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, ¹² while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." ¹³ 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.

In the name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 At least two officials from Capernaum came to Jesus to implore Him to heal someone. One official came to ask Jesus to heal his son, who was ill. Remember him? You heard his story in St. John's account of the Gospel toward the end of the Church Year, on the 21st Sunday after Trinity. He came to Jesus, hearing that He had come from Judea to Galilee, to ask Jesus to come to his house to heal his son who was near death. But Jesus declined to come to the man's house, instead rebuking the man for his lack of faith: "Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe." But the official persisted, "Sir, come down to my house before my son dies." Come to my house, Jesus; I need a miracle from you.

2 The second official from Capernaum, a Roman centurion from today's Gospel reading, came to Jesus to ask Him to heal his paralyzed servant, suffering at home terribly. What's the difference between the two men? They both come to ask Jesus to heal someone back home. And, eventually, Jesus heals both the son of the official and the servant of the centurion. So why does the official in John 4 earn a rebuke—"Unless you see signs and wonders, you will never believe"—and the centurion receive one of the highest commendations in the Gospels—"Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith"?

3 The official wanted Jesus to come to his house to heal the boy. But when Jesus offered the centurion to come to his house to heal his servant, the centurion declined Jesus' gracious offer. "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word and my servant will be healed." The official thought he was important enough to call Jesus to his house. The centurion, however, knew better. He was not worthy. And his knowledge of his unworthiness earns this Gentile a commendation for faith greater than any in Israel.

4 The two men represent two different mentalities. The Jewish official supposes he deserves what Jesus offers: healing for his son. But the only way to be worthy of what Jesus comes bringing is to have what the centurion has: genuine repentance and faith in Jesus as savior. He's a powerful man, an important fellow, but he makes no pretensions about his standing before the Lord. The Gentile centurion sets the paradigm for 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." Having Jewish blood in your veins is nothing. Having Lutheran blood in your veins is nothing.

5 These are the two approaches to the Lord. Do you, like the official who's perturbed when Jesus won't come to his house, presume to grace the Lord with your presence? Do you suppose that God is honored to have you come into His house? Repent. You may make no demands of the Lord. You are not worthy to have Him come under your roof. Learn how to approach the Lord from the centurion. It is not you who grace Him with your presence but He who blesses you with His presence.

6 Don't bring your worthiness to Jesus and expect Him to be impressed. Unworthiness is what the Lord looks for. It's what the Roman centurion and the leper have in common. Neither is the one you'd expect to be well-respected in the Jewish synagogue. The Gentile was an outsider by birth, and the leper was an outsider because of his contagious skin disease. But Jesus welcomed both of the outsiders. He touched the leper, and, instead of being infected with leprous rot of the flesh, he infected the leper with cleanliness and health.

7 The very presence of Jesus is infectious. Every disease, every pain, every death is the result of sin's presence in the world. And everywhere Jesus goes, He reverses sin's awful curse. He cures diseases, drives out demons, raises the dead, heals bodies and cures souls. It's not simply that He's God that allows Him to heal His creation. It's that He takes away the consequence of sin because He takes away sin. He heals the leper because He takes away his leprosy of sin. He heals the centurion's servant's painful paralysis because he assume the paralysis of sin.

8 So the Jesus who came healing diseases and raising the dead died from the affliction of sin. He bears all of sin's awfulness, such that St. Paul can say that "God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us" (1 Cor 5:21). Only sinners die. And only the worst Sinner ever, the One who took all of the world's sinfulness upon Himself died the death on the cross, eternally separated from God at the moment of His death. The blood and

water that flow from the pierced side of His dead body are the proof that the Savior died and that sin's consequences are being undone. You, like the centurion, are not worthy, but still the Lord gives you His forgiveness.

9 Jesus doesn't offer to come to your house like He did for the centurion. But He who was crucified and risen for you does something even better. When He gathers you into His house, He graces you with His presence. And at His Supper, He enters under the roof of your mouth. That's why the centurion's confession is the basis for the traditional prayer to prepare to receive the Lord's Body into your mouth. Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, but speak the word only and my soul shall be healed. And He does both. He gives Himself into your mouth and speaks the word that heals your soul and promises healing for your body.

10 Even though for the remainder of your temporal life, as long as you live in this sinful world, your body will suffer the consequences of being in a sinful world, even though until the Day of the Lord's return, this life is one of disease, and suffering, and death, the Body and Blood of Jesus do more than heal your soul. They heal your body, too. Whoever eats His Body and drinks His Blood will live forever. They heal not only your soul but also your body, giving you endless life to come. Come recline at His table with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, patriarchs and prophets, apostles and evangelists, and all the company of heaven, feasting on the Body and Blood of Jesus which forgive your sins and give you eternal life.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
Pastor Jeff Hemmer
Hope, Jerseyville