

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany, A ✕ D 2011

Matthew 8:1-13

In the Name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

1 What would Dr. Phil say about these two men? A little more assertiveness, a little less mild-manneredness, might be what they need. They seem like weak men, men unsure of themselves, lacking confidence in their positions in life. The leper with his “If you will, you can make me clean” and the Roman Centurion, a man in command of 100 troops, with his “I am not worthy that you should come under my roof” are not shining examples of American ideals like rugged independence, robust self-confidence, and implacable determination.

2 The leper, for instance, comes to Jesus and kneels before Jesus, imploring Him, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” Who can respect a man who comes groveling and kneeling? What kind of masculinity is that? Where is his self-respect? Sure, he’s a leper, which means social ostracization, outcast from the Jewish community by his physical impurity. Even touching him is prohibited. You would think such a disease, such a condition would steel his resolve and temper his character, that it would give him the fortitude and grit to avoid confrontations like this, kneeling before Jesus, asking for help without any work on his part, without anything he can contribute.

3 The centurion seems worse. He’s a soldier, a man in charge of 100 other troops, a man well acquainted with power and with violence. When Jesus entered Capernaum, the centurion came to Him, praying, “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.” So? Out with it, man; say what you want. But when Jesus saw through the veiled request for help, saying, “I will come and heal him,” the centurion declared, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.” How pathetic does that seem? “I am not worthy”?

4 These are not browbeaten, cowardly men. Quite the opposite, in fact. There’s a great amount of courage required to speak this kind of a truth: I am not worthy. To tell the truth about someone else is relatively easy, which is why your first reaction to the preaching of the Law is to think “Those guys really need to hear this.” But to tell the truth about yourself, that’s exceedingly more difficult and none too popular. So learn from these men what Christianity truly is.

5 Learn from the leper to tell the truth about yourself. Lepers were outsiders by law, cut off from the people of God because of their disease. Leprosy is the perfect picture of sin. It eats away at your flesh, destroying your body, alienating you from others, with no way to get rid of it, no simple cure. Such is sin. You cannot cleanse yourself. You cannot work your way back into the people of God. You cannot avoid the slow decay of death. So the leper came to Jesus. Learn from the leper the truth of your sin, and learn from him the solution to sin and death. “Lord, if You will, You can make me clean.”

6 Learn from the centurion the truth of repentance and faith. 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 repentant faith. Of him, Jesus declared, “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.” Hoping to be worthy won’t do the trick. Lying to yourself or hoping for a God who doesn’t know all the facts, who doesn’t quite know the whole truth, is vain and hopeless. Learn from the centurion, the Gentile outsider, the nature of repentant faith. “I am not worthy that you should come under my roof.”

7 Learn to tell the truth about yourself from these two men, more manly than most; learn to speak the truth about your whole self. Only in acknowledging this truth about yourself—I am a sinner, and not worthy of the presence of the Lord—is there hope. To confess your sins takes a remarkable amount of courage. To face who you really are, even in the deepest recesses of your life, is a daunting task. But acknowledging this truth will lead you to another Truth. Learn from these two men of the One who called Himself the Truth. Learn that, in speaking this truth about yourself to Him, I am not worthy, you will hear an even better truth about yourself spoken back to you. Learn from them of the Lord who touches lepers and cures their leprous decay. Learn from them of a faith at which Jesus Himself marvels, the faith that is received purely as a gift, a faith which counts on no worthiness of your own, but solely on the goodness and mercy of Jesus.

8 It’s not these two unworthy men who are driven away. In recognizing their unworthiness, they have hope. Jesus comes not for the worthy, but for the unworthy. He came to be infected with the leprosy of your sin and to die in your place, to take the infection of your sin and infect you with Himself, with His righteousness. He came to be sin in your place, so that, despite your unworthiness, despite your abject failure to keep any part of the Law of God, you might be welcomed back into the people of God because of the death of the Son of God. Once, by the work of the Holy Spirit, you have the courage to confess “I am not worthy; only if You will, Lord, can I be made clean,” you hear a new truth from Him who is the Truth. I forgive you. I baptize you. I make you my own. I count the death of Jesus as yours. I free you from slavery to sin and death. I love you. I am your Lord.

9 Finally, learn from the Church to confess this truth about yourself as you approach the Lord at His altar. As Jesus 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.” Whoever supposes himself to be worthy and deserving of the Lord’s Supper is unworthy. But whoever deems himself unfit to have Jesus come and dwell with him, unworthy to receive the true Body and Blood of Jesus, is the recipient for whom the Lord’s Supper is intended. Come, you least worthy. Receive the Lord who welcomes and forgives the unworthy.

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Pastor Jeff Hemmer

Hope, Jerseyville