

“Worthy”

Luke 7:1-10

2nd Sunday after Pentecost

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Christ the King Lutheran Church

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Grace to you and peace from God our creator, Christ our redeemer, and the Spirit our comforter. Amen.

I love summer worship—with this Memorial Day weekend being the official *unofficial* start of summer. The feeling of summer worship is just a little different, isn't it? I mean, it's starting to get hot, we haven't quite got the A/C regulated yet, Sunday School has finished for the year, the choirs are all on summer recess after a rousing Music Sunday last week. And of course, we pastors don't tend to robe up for the summer—projecting that relaxed, informal, come-as-you-are-ness we want summer worship to be all about.

And as Pastor John pointed out in his devotion earlier this week, this summer we also get to hear some of the best storytelling ever from Luke's gospel, as he recounts these amazing, life-changing, transformational encounters between Jesus and the various and nefarious people he meets. Throughout the summer, we'll continue to hear stories of Jesus healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead, we'll hear challenging stories about what it really means to follow Jesus—both then and now—and finally we get to hear even more stories, more teaching from Jesus about how *not* to be possessed by our possessions, in order to be free to better respond to him. These are stories we can enter into, that we can sort of locate ourselves in; in hearing these stories, it is as if we can also add our voices crying out to Jesus, saying “heal us, lead us, free us.”

Today, we begin by hearing the first of these healing stories. Jesus heals the slave of a Roman officer, the centurion, which means someone in charge of 100 men. Did any of you notice something different about *this* healing story? Think about HOW Jesus performs this particular healing. He heals the slave without ever speaking directly to the slave, he doesn't even speak directly to the centurion. This is actually quite different from many of the healing stories in the gospels. Usually, Jesus heals by touching. He reaches out his hands, stretches out his arms, touches ears or eyes or even a tongue. At least once, even, someone gets healed by touching Jesus—do you remember that story, Jesus is in a crowd and a woman reaches out and touches him and he's like, “Hey, what's going on, someone

touched me, I felt the power go out of me.” Apparently Jesus’ healing touch works both ways...

But today, in this story, Jesus heals from a distance. Why do you think he does that? Why would he heal from a distance *this* time when usually he heals in such a hands-on way? Maybe the clue is in the story itself—the whole episode is a study in indirect communication. The centurion sends word to Jesus that he wants his slave healed, that he’s sure Jesus can do it, and not only that, he’s quite sure that Jesus can carry out this healing much in the same way that the centurion has just dispatched his message. It’s a kind of “I’ll have my people contact your people” sort of healing. The centurion describes this way: you are a man of power, Jesus, a man of authority, just like I am. I say do this, and it’s done. I say jump, my people say, how high. I’m guessing you must be like that, too, Jesus, he says. You must be able to do what you do the same way I give commands to my soldiers.

Suddenly, this gospel is not simply about healing, it’s also about power and authority. It isn’t just about faith, either. Yes, Jesus commends the man’s faith, saying that he has never before seen such faith in all of Israel. But that faith that Jesus commends is the faith of one who believes specifically in Jesus’ power and authority. He tells the Jewish elders, that this foreigner—this military officer, this agent of foreign occupation and oppression--*his* faith is a faith that believes that Jesus has the authority over the power of life and death, the authority to say be gone, and the sickness is gone. So this could be a text about healing, this text could be about faith, it could be text about authority, or maybe “all of the above.”

But today, I want to focus on another aspect of this gospel text. I want to take a look at the word, at the concept of being “worthy.” It’s a word that comes up two or three times in today’s reading and a concept that underlies it even more than that. The centurion wants his slave healed because this slave is clearly of great value. He is *worthy* of being healed, his master thinks, he is *worthy* of Jesus’ time and effort. The Jewish elders—acting like a sort of Greek chorus in this passage, offering both narration and moral interpretation to the scene—they walk up to Jesus and tell him that they think this particular Roman soldier is probably worthy of Jesus’ time and effort, too. Likely not aware of Jesus’ earlier, more

blanket commandment to “love your enemies,” they assure him of his relative worthiness as far as enemies go. He’s one of the good *occupiers*, Jesus. He may be from Rome, Jesus, and a heathen and an infidel to boot, but clearly he loves our people, he treats us fairly—for crying out loud, he built us a synagogue! He is worthy of doing something nice for, Jesus.

But then the messengers arrive with his request, which includes these words from the centurion himself: “I’m *not* worthy to have you enter my house, Jesus; but just say the word, and he will be healed.” Jesus and his words are worthy, even if the centurion feels that he himself is unworthy of Jesus coming to his place.

I wonder, how often do we find ourselves in life saying things like this centurion said: I don’t think I’m worthy of your attention, God. I don’t deserve your good favor. I am not worthy of your promise, of your acceptance, of your forgiveness. I am not worthy of you entering my house, Lord. If you come from a Roman Catholic background, or even certain branches of the Lutheran church globally speaking, you may know that phrase from the liturgy; “I am not worthy of you entering my house, Lord.” It’s the last thing you say before receiving communion. We’re used to feeling unworthy—or of being told that we are.

Or else, when bad things happen to us from time to time, we ask it the other way around. What have I done to deserve this? Why am I suddenly worthless enough to have earned this? Despite the fact that the Christian message focuses on grace, mercy and forgiveness, still we feel unworthy. Despite the fact that on some level we know that there is nothing we can do to earn we feel like we need to count up points—we judge the relative worthiness of our lives based on what we’ve done, what we’ve not quite done, what we’ve left undone.

I want to take a few moments and have each of you think of a time or a situation in your life when you felt you were unworthy. Maybe it’s a totally human situation—some praise you don’t think you merited, some honor that was bestowed on you. Maybe it’s more of a God thing—a time or event or situation when you felt utterly unworthy of God’s love, undeserving of God’s grace. Take a moment or two, reflect on this on your own—there’s room on the bulletin if you want to jot a few things down, too. Think of a time when you either felt or maybe even were told that you were unworthy.

Now take another minute or so and, as you feel comfortable, share that moment with a person sitting somewhere near you. Think, Pair, Share. Just for another couple of minutes. [pause] Were you able to think of a moment or two? Were you able to share with someone else a time when you felt unworthy?

There is an interesting thing going on here today. Yes, we live in a culture that tends to demand of us a constant accounting of our achievements—how we're worthy of this or deserving of that—one that tends to also paint the "other" as unworthy. Which leaves us feeling if not totally unworthy, perhaps at least *less* worthy than others. The centurion considers his slave to be highly valued, and therefore worthy of Jesus' attention. The religious elders say that the centurion is a good man, worthy of Jesus' intervention. The centurion says he himself is unworthy of Jesus entering his home, but that Jesus' word is worthy of his faith and trust. All of this could seem like an exercise in assigning points, of calculating relative worth—who is worthy of Jesus' care, who has enough points in the popular accounting to merit Jesus' loving, healing touch, who's life matters?

But Jesus doesn't need assurances from the centurion to know that the slave's life matters. He doesn't need the unsolicited testimony of the elders to know the centurion is worthy. He doesn't need an accounting of any of our "good deeds" in order to declare us worthy. He doesn't need you to justify yourself by any criteria at all to be convinced that you matter, that you're worthy. This is the good news at the heart of Jesus' ministry. You don't need to keep score. You don't need to count points. You are not made **worthy** by your points, your actions, your good deeds, your accomplishments. Jesus says, you are made worthy by me, says Jesus. You are made worthy through me, says Jesus. You don't need points.

People of God, stop counting up points. Stop keeping score. The points don't mean anything—nothing at all. You are worthy because God in Jesus Christ has declared you so.

You are worthy. Have faith. Be healed. Amen.