

Amazing Faith!

Luke 7:1-10

When now he completed all his words into the hearing of the people, he went into Capernaum. And the slave of a certain (the head of a hundred men – Centurion), evil having, was about to come to an end, who was honored to him. And because he was hearing concerning Jesus he sent to him elders (presbyters) of the Jews asking him that in coming he should bring safely through his slave. And arriving at Jesus they were encouraging him with haste, saying “He is worthy the one for you to do this. For he loves our nation and he built our synagogue.” And Jesus was traveling with them. And now he was not far distant from the house the Centurion sent friends saying to him, “Lord, do not skin yourself, for worthy I am not that under my roof you should enter. Therefore I did not deem myself worthy to come to you. But say the Word, and my boy shall be healed. For I also am a person under authority, ordered ones having under myself soldiers, and I say to one, “Go!” and he goes, and to another, “Come!” and he comes, and to my slave, “do this!” and he does. And hearing this Jesus was amazed at it and turning to his acolytes in the crowd said, “I say to you, not at all in Israel such great faith I found.” And when those who had been sent returned to the house the found the slave healthy.

AMAZING FAITH RECOGNIZES OUR UNWORTHINESS AND JESUS’ WORTH

We Believe We Are Worthy

In the 1990s Mike Meyers, the voice of Shrek, was the star of Saturday Night Live. There was hardly a successful skit on the show that didn’t somehow involve him. He was Lothar of the Hill People; he was the Ranting Scot; he was Dieter, the German Host of Sprockets; and he was Wayne, of the “hit cable TV show” Wayne’s World, broadcast live from Wayne’s basement. One of the lines that has forever stuck in my head from “Wayne’s World” was the line Dana Carvey and Mike used when one of their heroes would come on the show. Whether it was Madonna, Arnold Schwarzenegger, or Tom Cruise, whenever they would meet them, they’d bow down to the ground and yell, “We’re not worthy! We’re not worthy!”

Christian brothers and sisters, if only we were like that! But we’re not. We’re infected with a disease called “worthiness.” It infects everyone. The world is full to the brim of it. It’s the disease that says WE are worthy of being praised with pure voices forever. WE are worthy of glory and honor and power and might. It’s what makes us want to bow down and worship the REAL Holy Trinity: ME, MYSELF, and I. *I, ME, MYSELF* am worthy – bow down, all of you, and worship ME.

What do you look for in a church? Ask one of our visitors. Ask especially the ones who come once and won’t be back. What do you look for? A church that’s friendly, that has a nursery, one where the coffee’s alright, where the sound system is good, where the pastor keeps me interested, where the people are loving and caring, where the worship isn’t too boring or too long, etc. etc. etc. We are WORTHY of these things. You, St. Mark’s Church – must prove that you are WORTHY of my being here. Are you WORTHY of my belonging? Is the Christ and God you preach WORTHY of MY presence? Will YOU look ME in the eye, bow down and yell out, “We’re not worthy! We’re not worthy!”?

It’s a disease, worthiness – and it even has a Latin name like all real diseases do. It’s called “incurvatus in se.” To be curved in on oneself. Have you ever taken a pair of scissors to a strip

of paper, like this? Starts out so straight, doesn't it? But these scissors are the disease we inherited from Adam. Now look. Beautiful curls, aren't they? Now try and straighten out the paper. So easy to curl. So difficult to straighten out again. That's our disease. I've curled up on myself, and now the only one worthy of anything in my life is ME.

The Jews Thought the Centurion Was Worthy

The Jews that came to see Jesus in today's Gospel had the same disease. Luke writes that when they arrived at Jesus "they were encouraging him with haste, saying 'He is worthy the one for you to do this. For he loves our nation and he built our synagogue.'" See, no one is exempted. They wanted Jesus to cure their benefactor's slave. There was no question in their mind that Jesus MUST do this thing. Why? Because the Centurion was *worthy*. What made the Centurion worthy? He was worthy because he thought the Jewish leaders were worthy. Do you get it? It's not because the Jewish leaders really *cared* about the Centurion. They liked him because of what he did for *them*. *He* was worthy because he thought *they* were worthy. So the Centurion was worthy of having Jesus cure his slave because the Centurion thought the Jews were worthy of having a synagogue. See how insidious the disease is? Everything comes back to ME, MYSELF, and I. It wasn't really the Centurion who was worthy of Jesus' help – it was the Jewish elders!

The Centurion Saw Jesus as the Only Worthy One

Now here's the incredible part. There is one person in this story who does NOT see himself as worthy. He's really the one person who could. It's the Centurion! A "Centurion" is literally the ruler or head of a hundred. In this case it's the ruler of a hundred soldiers. This guy is high up the chain of command in the Roman military, respected even by the people he's ruling, a benefactor, who treats even his slaves with honor and respect. Now that's someone WORTHY! That's the sort of person who can call in favors, and people would be more than willing to help. For goodness sake, he's even got the elders of the Jewish synagogue hoofing it all the way to Jesus to see if he'll heal his slave. Well, actually to COMMAND Jesus to heal his slave!

But here's the surprise. The Centurion doesn't appeal to his good behavior, or his background. He doesn't say, "Jesus, look at all I've done and how good I've been. Help me out." He doesn't say, "How could you dare refuse me, after all I've done for your people!" He doesn't say, "Jesus, I know you love everyone unconditionally, so you better love me TOO!" He won't even see Jesus himself. He sends his friends. Listen to the message the friends' bring from the Centurion:

Lord, do not skin yourself (that's literally what he says), for I am *not worthy* that you should enter under my roof. Therefore I did *not deem myself worthy* to come to you.

Lord, don't skin yourself. Don't let me be an inconvenience to you. Don't let me be a burden. Why? Because I can't be bothered to see you? No – because *I am not worthy*. I'm not worthy! I'm not even worthy to come speak to you in person. I can't make any claims of you, I can't make demands of you, I don't deserve anything from you. Then what does he say?

But say the Word, and my boy shall be healed.

Say the Word. It's as if the Centurion is saying, "Lord, I believe you can do whatever you want, however you want. I am not worthy for you to heal my boy, but I know you can. I only ask, and will humbly abide by your decision."

What can Jesus be but amazed and astonished? Especially after these Jewish leaders have come to him making these claims about how *worthy* the Centurion is and how *worthy* they are. Here is the Centurion, claiming not to be worthy of anything, not even to see Jesus in person.

We See Jesus as the Only Worthy One

That's faith - true trust and faith. That's what Lutherans call "saving faith." Don't talk to me about your friend who never comes to worship but has faith in Jesus. Don't talk to me about your relative who "loves the Lord" but just doesn't like having to say she's sinful. Don't talk to me about how your faith is so great you only need the Lord's Supper for the forgiveness of your sins once a year. Don't talk to me about how WORTHY you are to receive the forgiveness for which Christ bled and died at Calvary. You're not worthy, and I'm not worthy. The Jewish leaders who kept the 10 commandments better than any of us ever will were not worthy. If we come to Christ expecting forgiveness, because we've deserved it, because we've earned it, we show ourselves to be the most faithless people in the world.

Only Jesus is worthy. Only Jesus is worthy. When he tells the Sun to rise, it rises. When he tells wars to start or cease, they start or cease. When he sends the Spirit out, the Spirit goes. He knows all things and all things are under his subjection. He is worthy.

Jesus bled and died for us. Not out of obligation but out of a selfless and unending love that our disease of being curled up on ourselves cannot understand. There was nothing Christ Jesus did that wasn't done without a thought for his own selfish interested or worth. Everything was done for you. Christmas - for you. Good Friday - for you. The insults, the scourging, the nails, everything - for you. He is worthy. He ALONE is worthy.

That's why we begin our communion services by asking for forgiveness. We begin by confessing that we are not worthy. We begin like the Centurion, by saying we are not worthy to come under God's roof - but only say the Word, and we shall be healed. We shall be restored and forgiven.

The attitude of faith is this - "Jesus, you will forgive me not because I am worthy, but because you alone are worthy." Those with such faith will find on their return home from this place that they indeed have been healed, just as Jesus had said.

Amen.