

Matthew 8:1–13
3rd Sun. after Epiphany
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
January 22, 2023

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Our Gospel Lesson this morning presents two striking examples of humility and faith, examples that can put our oftentimes weak faith to shame. The leper and the centurion were both to some degree outcasts in Israel—the leper because leprosy rendered him unclean and the centurion because he was a Gentile. Yet it is the unclean and the outcast who recognize their impurity and turn to our Lord Jesus Christ in faith, because only sinners can come to Jesus. The leper and the centurion trust in our Lord Jesus Christ’s power over all things. They trust Jesus despite what hinders them. They boldly ask Jesus for what they want, and so they receive according to the Lord’s will. The leper and the centurion are examples to us of true humility and faith in Christ, who makes all things ours.

It’s hard for us today to imagine the life of shame and exclusion endured by a leper in biblical times. Leprosy is a bacterial disease with obvious manifestations. From skin blotching to deformed features and loss of limbs, the toll of leprosy on one’s body could turn grotesque. A leper would be declared unclean by the priest and exiled from town until the leprosy was healed. Quarantined from family and friends and from the house of God, the leper would have to wait out his fate with other lepers. The risk of infecting the healthy was too great and the shame of the disease too much.

The leper in our Gospel Lesson this morning had heard the reports about Jesus. He knew Jesus taught with authority, healed diseases, and cured those troubled with unclean spirits (Luke

6:18). The leper trusted in Jesus's divine power and so he knelt before the Lord in humility, saying: "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." The leper is saying to Jesus: "I know you have authority to heal me. If it is your will, you can make me clean. May your will be done." And then Jesus stretched out His hand and touched the leper, saying: "I will; be clean." Here Jesus opens His divine heart to let the leper and us see in. Jesus not only has the authority to heal. Jesus *wants* to heal. He heals to fulfill those words spoken by Isaiah the prophet: "He took our illnesses and bore our diseases" (Is 53:4; Matt 8:17). That's why He touches the leper. Jesus is taking the leper's disease upon Himself to bring healing and new life. Jesus takes *our* sins and diseases upon Himself, and in exchange gives us new life.

Like a leper, our Lord Jesus Christ's appearance at Calvary was "so marred, beyond human semblance, and His form beyond that of the children of man" (Is 52:14). He had no form or majesty that people should look at Him, and no beauty that they should desire Him. Like a leper, Jesus was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not. Like a leper, our Lord was put outside the city to die in uncleanness. There He was cut off from His people, cut off from the land of the living, to take away the guilt of all the sins and impurity of the world by dying on the cross.

After healing the leper, Jesus then entered Capernaum and was approached by another outcast, a Gentile centurion. The centurion was an officer in the Roman military, a leader of a hundred or so soldiers. The centurion came to Jesus interceding for his servant, lying paralyzed at home and suffering terribly. When Jesus said He would come and heal the centurion's servant, the centurion responded with humility: "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof." The centurion knew that as a Gentile and not a Jew, he was considered tainted by many in

Israel. He was a Gentile sinner (Gal 2:15), by birth separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, a stranger to the covenants of promise and having no hope and without God in the world (Eph 2:12). As a Gentile, he could only associate with the Jewish people to a limited degree. For example, he could only enter the outer part of the Temple, the courtyard of the Gentiles. But even more than that, the centurion recognized his own innate unworthiness as a man born under the curse of original sin in the face of the holy and almighty God. The centurion recognized he was unworthy to have Jesus come to His home, so He expresses faith in Jesus's all-powerful word: "only say the word, and my servant will be healed."

The centurion was a man under authority and a man with men under his own authority. He knew the dynamics of authority and the power of a commander's order. The centurion recognized that Jesus has authority in His teaching and works, authority over sicknesses and demons. The centurion was a lowly Gentile, but he trusted in the one who came to bless all the nations, the seed of Abraham, the Son of Man and Son of God who came for all people. The centurion trusted in the Word made flesh, who dwelt among us. He trusted that Jesus could heal simply by speaking a word. And what does Jesus say about the faith of this Gentile sinner? Jesus marveled and said to those following Him: "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith." In faith, this Gentile sinner becomes a child of God while the children of Abraham according to the flesh are lost in their unbelief.

The leper and the centurion who approach Jesus are both examples to us of humility and faith. The leper recognizes his own impurity and uncleanness, both physically and spiritually. And yet he also recognizes the only one who can make him pure and clean again, our Lord Jesus Christ. The leper turns to Jesus in faith, trusting in our Lord's authority to heal and to save. The centurion recognizes that he, as a Gentile and a sinner, is unworthy for Jesus to even come to his

home. In faith, he trusts that Jesus has the authority to heal his servant by His word alone. Like the leper, we are impure and unclean because of our sins. Like the centurion, we were born Gentile sinners, separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise and having no hope and without God in the world.

Yet in His grace, God leads us to realize our impurity and uncleanness, our separation from God. We encounter the Law of God in Scripture and it reveals how sinful and unclean we actually are. Like the leper and the centurion we recognize that because of our sins we are not worthy to be forgiven or healed. We are not worthy in and of ourselves to have an audience with God. But in God's Word we also encounter the Gospel, where Jesus tells us: "I will; be clean. I desire your life and salvation. I want to help you. I will come and heal you." Jesus wants to heal us. He wants to forgive our sins and spend eternity with us. He is patient with us, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance (2 Pet 3:9). And so Jesus comes to us in His Word to recreate us and give us new life, all by grace alone, without any merit or worthiness in us. We are but unworthy servants, yet our master comes to serve us and make us worthy.

So when you feel your sin and your unworthiness, when you sense your isolation or separation from God, come boldly in faith like the leper and say: "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." If you confess your sins, God is faithful and just to forgive you your sins and cleanse you from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Come to the Lord boldly in faith like the centurion, saying: "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word." In faith we recognize our unworthiness, and in faith we trust Christ and His Word, which creates a clean and worthy heart within us.

It's no wonder, then, that the prayer of the centurion becomes the prayer of Christians desiring to partake of the Lord's Supper. As one old Lutheran prayer has it: "Dearest Redeemer, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, yet let Your grace, which is capable of all things, make me worthy and perfectly equipped, that the blessed food and drink of your true body and blood may refresh my soul in the heavenly feast of love and joy!" (LPC # 301). With the centurion then, we too join the many who come from east and west to recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. And we too hear the words of Jesus, "Go, let it be done for you as you have believed." In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.