

2nd Sunday after Pentecost
May 29, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

The word worthy comes up twice in this Gospel story. Jewish leaders say that the centurion, a Roman military leader, is worthy of Jesus' help. Later the centurion sends friends to tell Jesus that he's not worthy to have Jesus come under his roof. Who is worthy?

Who is worthy of acceptance by God's people?

Who is worthy of Jesus' care?

Who is worthy to receive healing?

Are we - considering we often struggle with doubts when we hear these accounts of miraculous healings?

As we look at our Gospel story today, there's some reason to think we're more worthy than this centurion:

- He's part of the occupying, oppressive Roman empire;
- And, he owns slaves - a common practice in his time but troubling to us.
 - We're told he values his dying slave highly but what does that mean?
 - Does he want his slave healed because he truly cares about the slave?
 - Or is it more like when the car you really need breaks down and you don't want the hassle of replacing it?
 - The centurion also compares Jesus' word to the authority of a master over a slave.
 - That's a troubling analogy - does he really get Jesus?
 - Is he worthy of Jesus' care?

On the other hand, the centurion sounds like a pretty great guy.

- He is a voice for his voiceless slave.
- He loves the Jewish people in the area and has built their synagogue for them.
- He's considerate of Jewish laws about contact between Jews and non-Jews:
 - which say that he shouldn't approach Jesus directly;
 - and that Jesus shouldn't go into his house.
- He seems pretty humble.

He demonstrates amazing faith in Jesus - trusting that Jesus only has to say the word, from a distance, and his slave will be healed.

So he seems pretty worthy of Jesus' care, right? Maybe more than most of us who struggle to believe in miracles? Or is the question of worthiness really the right question? We human beings spend a lot of time trying to figure out who is worthy and who isn't and how we compare to one another. The impulse finds its way into our religious life as well; we spend a lot of time trying to judge our own and others' worthiness in the name of religion.

This impulse played out in the Judaism of Jesus' day as people used God's law to try to determine who was worthy of God's care. Only law abiding Jews were considered truly worthy; friends of the Jews, like this centurion, might receive some consideration on a case by case basis. Yet throughout the Old Testament we see that God gave the people the law not so that they could judge and exclude but so that life would go well for them and they could be a light to all people. We see this in our first reading today as Solomon prays at the

temple for the foreigners who will come to know God through the Jewish people. All people are beloved of God and worthy of God's care. But the impulse to judge and exclude and determine worth based on the law was strong and persisted in the early church. Some of the early Christian leaders insisted that new Christians had to be circumcised and had to keep Jewish dietary laws in order to follow Jesus. That's what Paul was reacting to so strongly in our reading from Galatians today - people who were perverting the Gospel of Jesus by adding restrictions and conditions.

Christians still can get judgmental about the law - concerned that we or others aren't measuring up morally. But now we've also developed another way to judge who is worthy. We now judge ourselves and others about our beliefs and how strongly we hold them. We often make belief into another test to determine who is in or out - thinking you have to believe the right things and believe enough in order to be worthy. We judge those whose beliefs we find strange; we judge ourselves for not believing enough. Many of us look at the story of the Centurion's faith and don't know what to make of it. We often struggle to know what to think about healings and miracles and Jesus' power and have some questions about people who seem to believe in them so easily. With those kinds of doubts are we worthy?

Yet throughout the Gospels when Jesus commended people for their faith it wasn't because they had correct beliefs, it was because they turned to him for help and trusted him with their struggles. Their need brought them into his healing, compassionate presence. Jesus didn't check to make sure that people believed the right things about him before he healed them. People came to Jesus in their need and he responded with compassion. It's worth noting, too, that really only a few people around Jesus actually experienced bodily healing. Jesus' mission wasn't to physically heal everyone who was ill but to bring healing, liberation, and reconciliation in our broken relationships with God, each and all of creation. In the Gospels we also see that faith isn't something that a worthy individual musters up alone; faith is developed and nurtured in community. The centurion heard about Jesus from others, had other people help him talk to Jesus and understood Jesus' authority based on his own human relationships.

Faith is not about becoming worthy by believing the right things. Healing doesn't come just to a few worthy individuals. Faith comes as together we look to God for the healing, liberation and reconciliation that we and our world need. As we do that, we experience profound healing - healing that is deeper than cures or quick fixes, healing that brings well-being in the midst of the pain of our broken world.

Today we've gathered as a community and bring our needs and the world's needs to the God we encounter in Jesus. Today Jesus is present with us in ways we can't fully understand or explain:

Jesus is present when two or three or more are gathered in his name;

Jesus is present feeding us with his very life;

Jesus is present in word and song;

Jesus is present as we go out and serve the world Jesus loves.

There is profound healing in this - healing that, again, we can't fully understand or explain. Encountering Jesus' compassionate presence in worship, prayer, community, study and service over time time brings healing. We are healed ...

of the ways we deem others or ourselves unworthy of God's care;

of the ways we try to deny our brokenness;

of the ways we live separated from God and others.

What are your needs? What is your brokenness? You have brought that need here into community and into Jesus' healing presence.

Let's take a few moments to silently name those needs before God and to rest in Jesus' healing, compassionate presence.