

Sermon Epiphany 3 2020

January 26, 2020

Matt 8:1-13

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson previously read.

This week I was pointed to an article about a church in Minnesota. Apparently this congregation there decided that they were not attracting enough young people, so the way they would deal with it was to tell all the older folks in it to leave for a couple of years so they could start fresh. Now, they did say the people could come back, and they did tell them they couldn't force them not to come, but still. The optics on something like that aren't good, are they? But what's underlying this? It's the assumption of the appeal to the world, isn't it? And youth is appealing, old age not so much. Now as I say that, I think that's even misguided, it seems that many my generation and younger actually are looking for churches that have a blend of people, a wholeness to the community. But what's that assumption at work here? If we want to keep the church going, we have to do _____, right? If the church is going to keep going, we have to change to appeal to the world. If the church is going to keep going we have to make ourselves look good so the world will like us. If the Church is going to keep going, we have to approve of the things the world approves of and encourage the things the world encourages.

And what's missing there? Who's the Lord of the Church? Who can make sure that the Church will keep going? Who could bring a thousand people through those doors Sunday after Sunday? I'll give you two hints: it's not someone in our pews and it's definitely not the guy in the pulpit. It's our Lord, isn't it? But when we think that it's up to us to do x,y,z in order to get people in the door, what is the underlying assumption? Where is our trust for that? It's in ourselves, in our wisdom, our abilities, our intelligence. And if we trust in those things, what does that mean? Where is our faith? Or where isn't our faith?

And that's what our lesson is about, isn't it? As Jesus commends this centurion, what is He commending? His faith. But that brings us to another question, what is faith? I know I discuss this with a bit of regularity, but it's always good to revisit. In our Catechism, we describe faith as, in essence, trusting in something. In what do you trust? That's where your faith is. Do you trust in your money to keep you secure? Your faith is in your money. Do you trust in the approval of others to satisfy your sense of fulfillment? That's where your faith is, etc.

Now as I say this, I think what I just said is somewhat obvious, but it's good to start with a foundation. I say that because one of the things I noticed when becoming Lutheran was that faith is spoken of in a way that's a bit different in Lutheranism. In fact, this sort of distinction is something that I heard described in a paper presented at the seminary my first year there. What the author said was this: If you look at how Calvin—or those who follow him in our day, those to the protestant side of us—for them the description would go something like the following. The Bible says all who believe will be saved. I believe, therefore I'm saved.

Now, what I just said is true. I'm guessing that's how many of you would describe faith. But the point that this article drew out was that as Luther described this faith, he would say it a bit differently. He would say instead, "Jesus says, 'I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Jesus doesn't lie, therefore I'm saved,' or perhaps even, "therefore, I am His." Do you hear the difference?

Now be clear it's not to say that the first statement is wrong, or that if you've been saying it that way, you should feel bad. In fact, I'm not even saying don't say that anymore. But what I am saying is that what we hear in this description based on Luther's pattern is a focus outside of me. How do I know I'm saved? Not because I believe enough, but because of what my faith trusts in. And what is that? It is in my Lord, the One who speaks to me and doesn't lie.

Now this sounds subtle, but look at what it's showing. As I speak, and hopefully more so think about this, I bring my focus outside of me, of my doing, and place it onto the Lord. My Lord is the One who saves me. He is the One who tells me this. He is the One whose Word carries all of the weight of His authority.

As the Centurion came to Jesus that's what He confessed. Here he is, Roman soldier, commander of one hundred men—that's what Centurion means after all—and he's got this servant that he cares for who's sick, paralyzed and suffering, and He hears of Jesus doing His work, and so He pleads with Him, "please heal my servant." And Jesus is prepared to do just that where the servant is. But then the Centurion makes this great confession: **Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.** Do you hear in that what I'm saying? Not "Lord I believe." Not even as the father of the boy in Mark says: "I believe, help my unbelief"—another beautiful confession by the way. No, it's humility. I'm not worthy of this. I'm not worthy that you would come to my house. I'm not able to contribute anything to this. But just say that Word and it's done.

Christian, what a blessing for you. Do you hear it? When you hit your point when you feel as though you have been crushed, when you have no other option. When you hit that point when it feels as though even your faith, your trust is at its end, how comforting? “Lord, I’m not able to do this, but You are.” And how do I know? Because I see it. I see it in the Lord’s coming into this world and bearing my sin. I see it in His death on the cross for that sin. I see how He has come alongside of mankind, come to be with us as our brother. And as He has done that He has come to bear the suffering. As the Centurion describes his servant, he says the servant is suffering terribly. Jesus has come to know that suffering with us. And even more so in our place on the cross, where we deserve it. But He’s done this so that in His resurrection, I would be raised to new life. He does this that you would be raised to new life.

And as we speak of what this faith trusts, it trusts Jesus, it trusts this work, and what else does the Centurion show? We trust the Word because that’s how He works it out. And this is who our God is. He’s the God who speaks. He’s the God who said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. He’s the God who spoke the whole creation into existence.

I love the way the Centurion says it. He knows. When he commands his soldiers, his word carries the authority of the Roman Empire to those men, and they do what he says as if he were the emperor himself. “Do this,” and it’s done. “Come here” and the man comes. “Go there,” and the man goes. So it is with the Lord. “Let it be done for you.” And it was done. Or for the Leper at the beginning of the lesson, “I will, be clean.” And the cleansing happens.

To show how this happens, I love that this is paired with the story of Naaman. Did you catch what happened there? Here Naaman is this man who’s a Syrian. He sounds like he’s not only a commander in their army like the Centurion is for the Roman army, but he’s got a really big role. The Syrian king knows this commander and obviously respects him. But he’s got leprosy.

In our day leprosy is treatable with antibiotics, so we don’t see it. But it’s horrendous. It’s a disease that brings death to the body limb by limb. So when Naaman has this, it’s a death sentence. But God gave this messenger to bring healing to him. This girl in his household tells him to go to Israel because there the prophet Elisha can help. So Naaman does. And what does he expect? He expects this big show. A tent revival sort of act. Instead, what happens? Elisha doesn’t even come meet him himself. No, instead he just sends his servant with a word: “go wash in the Jordan.” I love Naaman’s response because it tells us about the importance of the word doing the doing. Look at it: **So [Naaman] turned and went away in a rage. But his servants came near and said to him, “My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? Has he**

actually said to you, ‘Wash, and be clean’?” So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. Do you hear it in there? It’s not the water that does it, but the word with the water. If the word hadn’t been spoken, the washing would have been nothing. The river Jordan wasn’t much compared to others in the eyes of Naaman, but the word made it the greatest river of all.

And Christians, does that sound like anything? It sounds like baptism, doesn’t it? This Jesus with His authority speaks the Word and that water there over even the infant does what it says. Even for that child who seems like he can’t believe for himself—which by the way as a quick note, faith isn’t this understanding in our brain, it’s not this strictly rational thing. It’s different from that as we see as we bring this infant to those waters. And it doesn’t look like much but the water is poured. And Jesus says there, “I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” And what happens? That baptism. That washing, that cleansing from the leprosy of sin by the blood of the Lamb. That burial with Jesus of our sin in His tomb. That covering in His righteousness that we are forgiven.

In fact, think even about how this Centurion brought healing to the servant by petitioning Jesus. Isn’t that so what we do for our children in baptism? Faith trusting not our work, but this Word of Jesus who does not lie? And we see how this works. We see our children, yes nurtured in the faith, but the Holy Spirit in them as they confess it. It’s not faith in ourselves, but that faith that looks outside of us to Jesus and the Word He speaks.

As we then think about something like the state of the Church and the worries of what this means, we take comfort that we don’t need to kick out our elderly in an effort to make the Church more appealing. We trust that the Lord of the Church will do what He does. We trust that He will build it and bring people in as He sees fit to do. However, that might be. Do we still confess? Of course, and we are called to do so faithfully according to what He says. But He does it.

And on a more personal level then, we also trust that Word applied to our lives. We trust that Word which says, “I forgive you your sins in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” And we trust the implications of that forgiveness. We trust that now God’s not mad at us. We trust that He truly does love us. We trust His Word that tells us He won’t leave us or forsake us, but provide for our every need of body and soul. In fact we trust this will be the case even when everything else tells us something else. That is faith. Amen.