

Lectionary 20 A 2020 (Modified)

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

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August 16, 2020

Matthew 8:5-13

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

If you are a Lutheran of a certain vintage, then you are familiar with these words: *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”* It’s a Bible verse, John chapter six, verse 68. A statement made by Peter. *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”* In most of the churches in our denomination, you would have sung those words just about every Sunday for the 28 years that the Lutheran Book of Worship guided our services of worship.

In case you are not privileged enough to be an old Lutheran, this was part of the gospel acclamation. Something Lutherans would say right before the reading of the Gospel and the sermon. Right before the Jesus story, or the Jesus words. It was bracketed by the word *Alleluia*. Which is the normal way to greet the gospel. *Alleluia. Hallelujah. Praise the Lord.* But in contrast to the bright cheer of the *Alleluias*, there’s something very plaintive, very resigned about Peter’s words. *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”* It’s as though we’ve tried everything else. Everything else leaves us empty. Everything else turns out to be a mirage. Everything else disappoints. And so we turn to you, Lord. It’s a very sober sentiment. A wise, weary, but hopeful sentiment. Out of the 31,000 verses in the undisputed books of the Bible, this is the one that Lutherans would recite every week. *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”* That and First John 1:8– *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.* These are the verses that Lutherans memorize by worshiping every week. Pretty sober lines.

Lutherans change the worship service from time to time. Or, more accurately: a few leaders change the worship, and everybody else complains about the changes! And this something we have in common with Roman Catholics. Catholics have a line that they say at mass every Sunday. You may have encountered it in its 20th century form: *Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.* It’s a paraphrase of something we encounter in today’s gospel reading. *“Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.”* And then, just like the Lutherans, Pope Benedict updated the liturgy in 2007, greatly upsetting a lot of American Catholics. And in the new version of the mass preserves this line, but is actually more faithful to the text of the Bible. *Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.* And the Catholics say this right before they receive communion. It’s the last thing you say before you go to the altar. *Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be*

healed. There's a real drama there, as Catholicism emphasizes that Jesus is physically present in that bread, and to receive the body of Jesus Christ into one's own body is like welcoming Jesus into your home, a home that is not worthy of such a guest.

The gospel story today concerns a Gentile, a non-Jew. In a certain sense, he is the worst kind of Gentile. A Roman soldier. The occupying military force. These guys were about as welcome in Jesus' country as the Nazis were in Paris during World War II. But this is an exceptionally generous man. In Luke's telling of this story [Luke 7:1-10] we are told that this Roman officer had built a synagogue for the Jewish people of Capernaum. We know cases of American soldiers in foreign lands doing good deeds for the local people. Helping people dig a well or build a school. This must have been something similar.

And it's likely that the precise meaning of today's story has to do with the fact that good Jews were not supposed to enter into the homes of Gentiles. Homes that might be defiled by pork, for example. Jesus is not worried about that! In our text today, Jesus replies to the request for healing with these words: "I will come and cure him." And that's when the centurion replies, "*Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof...*" There are two levels of meaning to that statement. On the surface, the centurion is simply showing respect and courtesy. If this man is not a Jew, yet built a synagogue for the Jews, then this is a man who respects the customs and values of the Jewish people. He doesn't want to put Jesus in the awkward and scandalous position of going inside a Gentile home. Jesus does that kind of thing elsewhere. But this man seems to have some class, and he wants to avoid that difficulty. I wish there were more like him in the world. So that's one part of what this statement means. "My home isn't kosher, and I don't want that to cause a problem." But the second level of meaning is the man's faith. Which Jesus ends up affirming. The man declares that Jesus' word, Jesus' command, will be sufficient. It's not necessary to come in person. Jesus' word will be enough. "*Only speak the word, and my servant will be healed.*"

It's a very profound statement. Somewhere I'm sure Martin Luther must have said some things about the power of Christ's word. Luther was in love with the notion that God's Word could transform our reality.

One of the challenges for those of us who live two thousand years after Jesus is that the questions that concerned people back then are not always the questions that concern us right now. I think most of the people in the Bible were afraid of being destroyed by the creation. By lions, storms, famines, floods. I think most of us today are afraid that humankind is going to destroy the creation. The things that concerned people in the first century are different than the things that concern us in the twenty-first century. For me, this is always most evident in the Jewish and Gentile tension that preoccupies the writers of the New Testament. The New Testament was written in the years when Christianity, which had originated as an entirely Jewish phenomenon, spread rapidly among non-Jews. And the question of how Jews and Christians could co-exist in one church body was a very thorny and difficult question. With different kinds of answers proposed by Matthew, Luke, John, and Paul. Jesus was Jewish. To what extent does a person

become Jewish when they become a Christian? Today's story comes from the same book of Matthew in which Jesus says: "*Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans.*" [Matt. 10:5] "*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you.*" [Matt 20:25f] "*When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do.*" [Matt. 6:7] There is frequently scorn for the Gentiles, shown by Jesus, in Matthew's gospel. "*It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*" [Matt 15:26] Jesus said those things, according to Matthew, referring to the Gentiles. It's hard for us Christians in the 21st century, who would be considered Gentiles, to appreciate the meaning of Christ Jesus according to Matthew which is that salvation for the world comes from the Jews. It's profound, and it's worth understanding. But it does not speak to our preoccupations today in a casual or simple way.

What is easier to grasp is this man's faith. He is not a Jew. He is not a Christian. He shows his faith not by rituals, not by words, not by doctrines. But by reverence. Reverence for the people in his community. Reverence for the Jews and their customs. Even though he is an outsider. Even though he is the one with great power and resources. Reverence. And reverence for his sick servant, too. A slave, really. And in addition to reverence, humility. He addresses Jesus as "Lord," which is another way of saying "Sir," or "Master," acknowledging someone higher up on the ladder. He's got a problem he can't fix on his own. So he makes himself vulnerable. He reaches out to a man, Jesus, whom he thinks might have the power to help. Humility.

Reverence and humility. The hallmarks of a man's faith, a faith commended today by Jesus. *Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.* Really, Jesus? Not in John the Baptist, or your mother, or Peter the rock upon which you build? Not in James and John who gave up everything to follow you? Something about this centurion distills faith in a way that pleases Jesus. I think it's the reverence and humility. Jesus expresses his pleasure in the centurion, but expresses dismay for those who feel entitled. "*Many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*" I think we lose something if we view this only in a two-dimensional binary opposition between Jews and Gentiles. There are things that transcend customs and dietary laws and cultural background. Reverence and humility. Which require faith in something unseen, something higher.

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. That's a way to approach Jesus with reverence and humility. *Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.* That's a way to approach Jesus with reverence and humility. This centurion has class. Jesus calls it faith. Jesus would like to see more of that. He says that it's an essential part of the kingdom—the realm—that he seeks to bring about. Amen.