

2 June 2013
Pentecost 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Right Faith”

Text: Luke 7:1-10; Galatians 1:1-12; 1 Kings 8:22–43

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

A centurion was a Roman military officer in charge of a cohort of 100 soldiers. This particular centurion seemed to be doing his job well. Normally, a military force occupying another country is not well liked. But the Jews liked this man. It seems he didn't just rule over them with an iron fist and a stern authority - which was certainly within his power. Instead, he kept the peace by befriending and helping the people, even building a synagogue for the people of Capernaum. And so they got along. So much so that, the Jews concluded, he *loves* our nation. He's a good guy.

So when this centurion's servant - one of his best and most highly valued servants - got sick, the Jews were concerned for their friend. When the servant didn't get better but instead grew even sicker, they worried with their friend. And when still the servant grew worse and was at the point of death, they would do anything to help their friend. They wanted to help this one who was so good and had done so much for them. And so when the centurion asked the elders of the Jews to go ask Jesus for help, they quickly went. They gladly went. It was the least they could do for their friend.

So they go, and when they find Jesus, they tell him all about this centurion. **He is worthy to have you do this for him.** He's a good guy. He's not like the others. *He doesn't deserve to have his servant die. He doesn't deserve this sadness. He doesn't deserve to have this happen to him. Come and help him.*

Interestingly, we are not told what Jesus said or thought about this - just **that He went with them.**

Perhaps then, what happened next was that a servant of the Jewish elders ran ahead with the good news that Jesus was coming, He was on the way - for the centurion seems to have a change of heart. Indeed, he has a *conflicted* heart. On the one hand, he wants Jesus to come and heal his servant. But on the other hand, he realizes he is not worthy for Jesus to come under his roof. So instead, he says to Jesus, just use your authority. Don't come to me - simply command it to be done.

Command the sickness to leave. Command death to withdraw. Command this body to heal. And it will be done. Just as the centurion commands his soldiers, so Jesus can command these forces and they will obey.

Now, if the centurion had just considered Jesus a miracle worker or a healer or just someone who had some kind of supernatural powers, this kind of talk wouldn't make sense. Why wouldn't the centurion be worthy to have that kind of person come under his roof? . . . But by his words, the centurion reveals that he knows Jesus is *more* than just all that. He is one who has authority - authority over nature; authority over sickness; authority over even matters of life and death. Or in other words: no mere man! For who has such authority but God alone?

Jesus heard this faith in the centurion's words as well, for: ***when Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."*** And that faith - not his worthiness - received the gift of God. For ***when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.***

This is a perfect story for us to begin the long, green, Pentecost season - to remind us that true worthiness before God is not to be found in what we do *but in what we believe*. And that is a truth that bears repeating and which we need to hear over and over again. Because the world bombards us with the opposite message - that if you're a good person, if you go to church, if you love God, if you give a lot and help a lot, then you deserve good things from God. Or, at the very least, you *don't* deserve bad things from God. . . . And it's easy to believe. It makes perfect worldly sense. And it slithers its way into us sometimes, when hardships come which we think we don't deserve, or when others get what we think we deserve. And maybe we then even accuse God of wrongdoing, shake the fist at Him, and think we're getting gyped.

This is, in fact, the "different Gospel" that St. Paul was railing against in his letter to the Galatian Christians. This *distortion* of the good news of Jesus that the Galatians were beginning to believe, which said there is something you not only *can* do, but *must* do, to be worthy of and deserve God's favor.

But the centurion had it right. Right faith comes empty-handed. Right faith confesses that we are not worthy and will never be worthy. Right faith acknowledges that we do not deserve for Jesus to come under our roof; we do not deserve Jesus' forgiveness. And to such right faith Jesus gives His gifts. That, in fact, is what makes them *gifts* - that they are not deserved, but they are given, freely. And so the truth is this: **if we come to Christ with anything in our hands we will leave empty-handed. But when we come empty-handed, we leave with full hearts and hands and lives, for we will be filled with His good things, with His gifts freely**

given, with His healing forgiveness, life, and salvation.

For in Jesus we see the answer to Solomon's prayer. Those verses from First Kings that we heard earlier were Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the new Jerusalem Temple. It was big. It was impressive. It was magnificent. It was the culmination of so many years work. It had the best of the best - there was nothing like it in all the world. But even it was not worthy as a dwelling place for the most high God, for the God whom even the highest heaven cannot contain. And Solomon knew it. ***Will God indeed dwell on the earth?*** Will He come and dwell with us? Will He come and listen to us?

Well, He *did*, for so He had promised. *But then He did even more.* For He didn't just come to dwell with us and listen to us, **He came and died for us.** God came and dwelled not in a magnificent Temple of stone, but in a humble Temple of flesh and bone. And He listened to and hung out with not only the good, but to the sinners, the outcasts, the dregs. He fought false teaching, false doctrine, false ideas about God, but not other men. Instead, He took their abuse, their ridicule, and the worst hatred they could dish out - the cross! - in order to show them how much God loves them. He came as God's gift. He died as God's gift. And now He gives God's gifts. And He gives to all. Not only to Israel, but as Solomon prayed, to the foreigner, the sojourner, to all who call on Him in faith . . . *like the centurion.*

And like you. Undeserving you. Unworthy you. For this one who has authority over matters of life and death now uses that authority and Word to raise you from the death of unbelief to the new life of faith in baptism, to raise you from the death of sin to the new life of freedom in absolution, and to give you the Body and Blood He raised from death to life as a pledge that He will raise your body from death to life, too. On the last day. For you are not just **a servant highly valued** by God, but even more - you are His child, dearly loved.

So what *you* deserve *He* has taken - that's the cross. And what you *don't* deserve He has *given* - that the gifts. And right faith says: **yes.** This is most certainly true. And this right faith then goes and does the same. Like Father, like Son. Like Christ, like Christian. The crosses that we bear in this world and life but opportunities to give and to receive. That it be as we sung just a bit ago: *Why should cross and trial grieve me* (LSB #756)? Why indeed, when we have what is greater! When we have the one who conquered by the cross, and still does.

So as it happened that day in Capernaum, so it is here today as well. We will leave this place today and return to our homes made well: healed, forgiven, and free. For so Jesus has spoken, *and so it is done.*

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.