

“Worthy”

Luke 7:1-10

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, “He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.” And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it.” When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

In July 2012, an important, even historic, conference was held. It took place in Washington, D.C., and included representatives of 77 countries around the world, who came together with one goal: to clarify the rules of etiquette so that when their leaders met one another, there would be no embarrassing gaffes.

You’ve heard some of these stories, right? When John F. Kennedy called himself a jelly donut while visiting Berlin... When Boris Yeltsin boogied a little too energetically at a presidential summit... When Gordon Brown’s cell phone went off with a loud ringtone in the middle of the World Economic Forum... When Bill Clinton fell asleep on the dais during another dignitary’s address... When George W. Bush gave Angela Merkel an unsolicited shoulder rub... When Michelle Obama hugged the Queen of England (whom one simply does not touch)... Or, of course, the inevitable private conversation captured by a very public microphone...

Try as those protocol officers might, they can’t seem to keep their bosses from fumbling and bumbling and stumbling from time to time. Obvious faux pas aside, it turns out that navigating the standards of global diplomatic behavior is a tricky business. Whose hand do you shake? To whom do you bow? With whom do you exchange a kiss, and is it on one cheek or both? How are you supposed to wave? Which gesture is the equivalent of flipping someone the

bird? When seated, do you cross your legs or keep both feet on the floor? And that's just for those people who are important enough and powerful enough to be in the room, let alone the rest of us mere mortals who are unlikely ever to come anywhere close to those halls of power.

The centurion in today's story surely knew a thing or two about protocol, because the Roman Empire was full of it, as was the Roman military. He knew how to stand at attention, how to salute, how to conduct himself appropriately depending on someone's rank. He had 100 soldiers under his command, whom he could order about as he chose, and they presumably addressed him with proper deference. He knew to whom he was important enough to speak—he could probably address his immediate superior, the commander of the cohort, but probably not the commander of the legion, and certainly not the general, and never in a million years would he dream of addressing the emperor. He knew that there are certain people to whom you simply don't dare to speak directly, because only a select few are worthy of that honor (and even they get the protocol wrong sometimes).

If that centurion had wanted to get a message to one of these higher-ranking officials, he would have done so through an emissary. He would entrust his communication to a person more important than he, someone who could be his advocate, someone the general or emperor would listen to, someone who could plead his case and explain why this little nobody merited the attention of such an important somebody. And if the centurion was fortunate, that person would do a good job of articulating his merit, and he would receive the attention or response he needed.

So you can understand why he might take a similar approach with Jesus. (Why he would turn to Jesus at all is a whole different question—why would a Roman officer ever look to an itinerant Jewish healer for help? But be that as it may...) Shaped as he was by the world he inhabited, formed as he was by the hierarchy he served, the centurion assumed that an important person like Jesus would not welcome a visit from a little nobody like him, no matter how dire his slave's illness may have been. Just as you or I would not waltz into the White House expecting to go straight into the Oval Office, the centurion knew that there were proper channels through which to approach a powerful person. So he sent emissaries, in this case Jewish elders, to whom he thought Jesus would listen.

The elders presented the centurion's request and pled his case. "He is worthy," they said, and they pointed to the centurion's deeds of kindness as evidence of his merit. "He loves our people. He built us our synagogue." They must have done their job convincingly, because Jesus went with them, presumably to visit the centurion's house and heal the sick man in person.

But when Jesus drew near to the centurion's house, the centurion got nervous. Maybe he hadn't expected the message to get through so quickly or so thoroughly. Maybe he thought Jesus had come not to heal but to scold him—*How dare you ask me for help?! Maybe he thought he was about to get a damning lecture—You and your soldiers oppress my people and possess our land, and now you turn to me for healing?! Or maybe he just hadn't done the dishes for a day or two and didn't want Jesus to see the mess sitting in his sink.*

Whatever his reasons, the centurion sent word to Jesus again. "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof." The Jewish elders had barely

finished telling Jesus how worthy the centurion was, and here he was undercutting their words with his own confession of unworthiness. But Jesus was not dissuaded from his mission. Although he did not enter the centurion's house now that he had been disinvented, when the friends returned, they found the sick man returned from death's door and restored to health.

Because here's the thing about Jesus. He requires no proper channels. He holds to no particular rules of etiquette. He does not need a protocol officer. He does not care how worthy or not a person is.

Not just this Roman centurion, but person upon person in story upon story discovers that Jesus' mercy is not a merit-based earning but a grace-based gift. You know these stories—the woman caught in adultery who receives an unexpected second chance... the tax collectors and sinners who are Jesus' chosen dinner companions... the betrayer and denier and doubter and deserters, all included at the supper table. Over and over throughout the gospels, and again in our story today, Jesus reminds us in word and deed that the love of God is poured out for us all, the worthy and the unworthy alike.

If you've ever thought, or said, "This is really small, I know, but..." or, "I'm not very good at praying, but..." or, "I don't want to bother God with..." or, "I'm sure there are more important things in the world to pray about..." or, "Why should God care about little old me?" or, "I don't have the right words..." or, "I'm sure I'm not faithful enough..." then know this: like the centurion, not even our self-declared unworthiness—whatever it is that we think disqualifies us from receiving that goodness and kindness and mercy—not even that can stop Jesus from bearing his healing love into all the broken places in our lives.

So, in that spirit, and in continuation of our Lenten practice of letting go of all the things that would separate us from God's love, I invite you now to come forward (up the side aisles), take a slip from the basket, and use the permanent marker to write on it a reason why you think you might not be worthy of God's love. Then, place that slip into the bowl here in the font and watch the whole thing melt away. And remember that whether you deem yourself worthy or unworthy, deserving or undeserving, God's love pours out on you, washing away those seemingly-permanent, self-imposed separations, as many times as it takes, because God will stop at nothing to have you know how much you are loved.

Here we go.