

Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church (Columbus, OH)
Third Sunday After Epiphany – January 23, 2022
Matthew 8:1-13 – Our Lord Comes Under Our Roof
By Vicar Peter Wagner

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. The text for today's sermon is from the gospel, from Matthew chapter 8, when Jesus cleansed the leper and healed the centurion's servant. The theme is that these two miracles teach about prayer flowing from faith.

Up to this point in his gospel, Saint Matthew has recorded in chapters 1 and 2 the birth of Christ, the visit of the Magi, the flight into Egypt, and the return to Nazareth. Then in chapters 3 and 4 he records John the Baptist preparing the way, the baptism of Jesus, Jesus being tempted in the desert, and calling his disciples. Following this, Matthew 5 through 7 is the Sermon on the Mount. That's where we pick up today in chapter 8, right after the Sermon on the Mount. In this text, by healing the leper and the centurion's servant, Jesus reveals himself as our Great Physician. He shows that he comes to heal us in both body and soul, to satisfy our physical needs and cleanse our spiritual disease of sin.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught about prayer. He said, "When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."¹

In the same sermon, Jesus also taught about faith. Faith trusts that your heavenly Father knows what you need before you even ask him. Faith starts with simple things, trusting God for basic daily needs. So Jesus said, "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?"²

Prayer is the language of faith. By calling on God, "Our Father, who art in heaven," we confess that our heavenly Father tenderly invites us to pray in faith. Faith approaches him with all boldness and confidence to ask him as his dear children, children he's claimed as his own through baptism. God loves to hear the prayers of his children, he's eager to provide for all our needs and to forgive our sins. For Christians, prayer and faith are inseparable.

Today, as Jesus finishes the Sermon on the Mount, he comes down from the mountain and meets a leper and a centurion. Both have faith; both pray. They both seek the Great Physician in their need, trusting his mercy. And Jesus answers their prayer. For their faith he performs the first two miracles in Matthew's gospel. First, the leper. This man had great faith. "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." That's certain confidence. This man had no doubt that Jesus was able to cleanse his leprosy. And Jesus was glad to do his heavenly Father's will. "Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, 'I will; be clean.' And immediately his leprosy was cleansed."

Like the leper who trusted that Jesus was able to heal his body, when we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," we confess our trust that God is able to give us what we need. But more than the leper, we should trust that God is willing and eager to provide for our needs. He made your body and soul, eyes, ears, and all your members, and he still takes care of you.

In the Lord's Prayer, what comes right after, "Give us this day our daily bread?" "Forgive us our

¹ Matthew 6:7-13

² Matthew 6:28-30

trespasses.” That’s because although we ought to trust God for the simple things, the food, drink, and clothing we need, we daily fail to do so. We rely on ourselves, our own hard work and resources. We don’t acknowledge God as the source of all we receive. And that’s sin. So we need to pray for forgiveness, we need God to forgive these trespasses.

Leprosy is an external disease that indicates the spiritual wretchedness of us all. We’re born in sin and we commit sin. We’re as rotten at heart as the leper appeared on the surface. Apart from Jesus there is no deliverance from our sinful spiritual leprosy.

So the prayer of faith that asks for daily bread also says, “Forgive us our trespasses.” When you pray for forgiveness, you entrust your salvation to Jesus Christ. Not only does he care for your bodily needs, but he has redeemed you, a lost and condemned person. He has purchased and won you from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood, and with His innocent suffering and death, to make you God’s own child.

We’re not worthy of such forgiving grace. When Luther explained the meaning of, “Forgive us our trespasses,” he said, “We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look at our sins, or deny our prayer because of them. We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them, but we ask that he would give them all to us by grace.”

We’re not worthy of God’s forgiving grace. Yet God both redeems us for Jesus’ sake and he provides for all our daily needs. He does all this only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. That’s the confession of the centurion, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.” According to Luke’s version of the story, the Jewish elders told Jesus that the centurion was worthy of help, since he had provided funds to build the local synagogue. But the centurion knew he was unworthy. He knew his own guilt, his sinful nature, his inner leprosy. Faith confesses unworthiness, faith offers nothing to God, it only pleads to Jesus for help and relies on his words of love and mercy.

Of ourselves, we’re not righteous and we’re not worthy to pray. But Jesus, the truly righteous man, prays for us. “The prayer of a righteous man – Jesus - avails much.”³ The one who prayed for the faith of his disciples in Gethsemane intercedes for you before the Father. He prays that your sin be put away because his blood has covered it. Jesus alone is worthy to come before the Father on your behalf. He covers you with his righteousness, his merit, his worthiness. By faith in him, God counts you as his child, he counts you worthy to pray, and he accepts your prayer.

Still, our prayers are feeble. How often does our sinful flesh keep us from prayer? How often are we apathetic in prayer, how often are we distracted? How often do we doubt that God hears us, or doubt he will act? How often do we say we’ll pray for someone, but neglect to actually do it? Our prayers are few and hollow, because we are children of little faith, as Jesus said. Yet even a little faith is better than no faith at all. A little faith still approaches the Father through Jesus. The Father still hears the feeble prayer of a little faith.

The Jewish elders were right to plead on the centurion’s behalf, but their petition should not have been based on his worthiness, but only on his faith. Like the centurion who pleaded for his servant, like Paul who always mentioned the churches in his prayers – like them, many of you are praying for loved ones: children, grandchildren, friends, and relatives who have no faith. You pray for them, but you feel helpless. You wonder what more you can do, what more you should say. Trust that God is the one who creates faith. Prayer is the best thing you can do. Entrust them to God’s loving care, for he is faithful. He who loved the world and gave his Son for it never stops calling his wandering sheep. God will not turn a deaf ear on your prayer. Like the centurion who didn’t see the results of his answered prayer right away, trust that God hears and answers your prayer.

³ James 5:16

And today, your Lord Jesus is pleased to come under your roof in this house of prayer. He comes in word and sacrament, to this sanctuary, to provide for all your needs of body and soul. Here the Holy Spirit brings you forgiveness through the means of grace. He keeps you in the one true faith, together with the whole Christian church on earth. He intercedes for you and teaches you how to pray. Romans 8, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”⁴

We are not worthy that Jesus comes under our roof. But since he loves us, the Incarnate Word is truly present here. “Lord if you are willing, you can make me clean.” He is willing. He is here to make you clean, to increase your faith and wash you in the water of baptism. Faith, which trusts the word of God in the water, brings salvation and new birth in the Holy Spirit. Jesus is willing. He is here to make you clean, to increase your faith and wash you in his cleansing blood. The man truly worthy to receive the Lord’s Supper is he who has faith in these words, “Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.”

So Jesus invites you to his banquet table, you who are but Gentiles like that centurion of old, Gentiles like Naaman the Syrian from our Old Testament text. Jesus calls you by grace from east and west to recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, to feast at the table of the Lamb. Therefore rejoice in the words of Psalm 103, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!” That name is Jesus, our physician of body and soul. “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit.”⁵ Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

⁴ Romans 8:26

⁵ Psalm 103:1-4