

“Who is worthy?”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
June 27, 2021

Luke 7:1-10

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Earlier this month, Jenna and I had the joy of visiting Emerson’s birth mother for his birthday. We drove down to New York City, stayed at an Airbnb in Brooklyn, and met her on the boardwalk of Coney Island. It was a ball. Well, all except driving in New York City traffic. That was a nightmare. There are no traffic laws. People double park, motorcycles fly between lanes, cars drive over medians, people stop their cars in the middle of the road and run away, drivers cut each other off; sometimes there are no lanes, it’s just cars jostling for power. It’s like the Wild West down there, if the Wild West moved really, really slowly. It took us two hours to go ten miles!

Now I like to think of myself as a nice person. I try to love people and treat them with respect. But 10 minutes into New York City traffic, and I was ready to kill someone. The murder rate in the City suddenly seemed perfectly reasonable. Of course, even outside the City, there are some people I struggle to love: telemarketers, drivers in the Wegmans parking lot, and almost any Internet customer service. Several times, I have made the mistake of calling Time Warner or Spectrum, only eventually to be rerouted to Dante’s inner circle of hell.

At first glance, we’d expect the centurion in our Scripture passage this morning to be one of these hard-to-love cases. He is a soldier of Rome, an enforcer of the oppression of the Israel, an enslaver of other human beings. Maybe this is a story about loving your enemy. And indeed that may be the story for Jesus, who has just, moments earlier, been preaching about love of enemy. But for the elders in this passage, who come to speak to Jesus on the centurion’s behalf, something else seems to be going on. They don’t seem to regard the centurion as an enemy at all.

We’re never really told who they are. We know they jump at the chance to help out the centurion, wanting to please this rich and influential figure. We know that this relationship has worked out pretty well for them; this centurion has been their friend, their patron. He’s built them a house of worship in exchange for loyalty and public support.

These may also be the same leaders who criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. They had no interest in Jesus’ healing when it was for crowds of poor people creating traffic and noise in their village. But now that a powerful person wants Jesus’ help, they’re perfectly willing to bend the same law they were so keen on enforcing moments ago (the same law that would prevent a rabbi like Jesus from entering the house of a Gentile).

We also know that the elders are adamant that this centurion is “worthy” of Jesus’ help. He’s worthy because of what he has done and could do in the future for them.

There's one more thing we know: they're wrong. Jesus doesn't help this man because he's "worthy" or because he's going to offer something in return. In fact, the centurion himself tells Jesus twice that he is "unworthy." Jesus helps because that's what Jesus does.

So who are these elders, these people who have become overly enamored with wealth and power, these arbiters of who's worthy of attention and who's not? I looked up the Greek word used in our text to get an answer. Typically, we'd expect a term such as Pharisee or Sadducee, but no, what I found was a distinctive word: *presbyteros*. Presbyterian. They're Presbyterians! Now, as many of you will know, we're called Presbyterians because we have elders, *presbyteroi*. Still, I wonder if there's not a message for us here.

At first, it might feel odd to equate us Presbyterians with these elders. We try to love everyone, just as Jesus commanded. We care about social justice. This very congregation was forged in the fight to abolish slavery. It has worked hard to welcome all people.

Yet if you take a look at most Presbyterian churches, even this one, you're not going to see a whole lot of diversity. What you might see is a church overly concerned about who's worthy.

Because when we actually have a chance to be in long term community with all of God's children—including the ones who worship differently than we do, the ones who look and act differently, the ones who challenge and unsettle our lives—it's not easy to follow through with our convictions.

And I get it. I only have so much energy and time to give, so inevitably I do end up prioritizing who should get that energy and time. And if I'm being honest, that prioritization isn't always based on need or justice; it's sometimes based on whom I like to be around. My prejudices may also become a factor. What others can do for me may also become part of the equation. Todd Weir writes, "It's fine for all the newly healed lame and blind and formerly demon possessed to come to the new member class, but could you bring me a centurion? I could really use some help with getting some big donors."

Whatever our reasons, we too are drawn to the ones who offer prestige and comfort. Aren't they the people we envision—all the young middle class families, not the homeless, not the undocumented, not the formerly incarcerated—when we talk about church growth?

There's this modern-day parable that says a new pastor, on his first day with the church, dressed up as a homeless person. He walked around his soon-to-be church for a half hour as people gathered; almost no one said hello to him. He asked people for help getting food; no one helped. When worship was about to start, he sat in one of the front pews, only to be asked by the ushers to sit in the back. People greeted him with stares and dirty looks. When it came time to introduce the new head pastor, everyone stood up and started clapping with joy. The homeless man walked to the front of the church and revealed who he was, telling them about his experience.

Now if he had shown up in a suit or even hipster jeans and black T-shirt, they would have fawned over him, just as the elders did over the centurion. But when he showed up as a homeless person, the people instinctively decided he wasn't "worthy."

The grace in our passage this morning, however, is that while Jesus could have refused to help or could have stopped to point out the elders' hypocrisy, he doesn't. He heals.

Jesus doesn't wait for the elders to understand. He doesn't wait for the centurion to renounce Rome and become a disciple. Jesus just heals. And to this day, our Lord, crucified and risen, is still healing. Healing the divisions that separate us, that put limits on our love. And just as Jesus immediately after helping the centurion helps a widow and empowers an outcast woman, Jesus is going to keep bringing into our midst both people who are powerful and people who are weak, people we like and people we don't, people who comfort us and people who challenge us.

Now I don't know what Jesus expected when he first started walking to the centurion's home. I do know the text says that he is "amazed" by the centurion's response of faith. Jesus is surprised. Somewhere along that dusty road, as Jesus crossed the gulf that separates the so-called worthy from the unworthy, a miracle happens. God heals the division, even if but for a moment, between Roman and Jew, between crucifier and the crucified. Two of the most unlikely characters forge a bond, and as a result a young man, deemed worthless by many because of his slavery, is given new life by a gospel that would make all oppressed free, in soul and in body.

The distance is not gone. Jesus is still on the road; he's nowhere near the centurion's house. The differences remain: Jesus is still a Jewish rabbi who will be crucified by the very empire the centurion has sworn to protect.

But faith has established itself along that road as a witness to what happens when we are willing, like Jesus, like the centurion, to stretch ourselves, willing to start the journey.

We too may end up being surprised by what God does. We may just see a pagan centurion become a witness to the gospel, a homeless person become a pastor, a veteran become a peacemaker, or even a person in our own community deemed unworthy transfigure into Jesus Christ himself.

The question, it turns out, isn't "Who is worthy?" It's "To whom is God calling me? To whom is God calling this church?"

The answer may surprise you. It may even frighten you. But I can promise you that it will give life to these vanishing bones. **Amen.**