

“Who is worthy?”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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You know what the problem is in moving to a smaller community like Auburn? It’s that you really have to watch your road rage. I mean, it’s probably not helping the cause of the gospel much if people see the pastor yelling some very unchristian things at the person who just cut them off. Now, in Louisville, with a population of more than half a million, I could enjoy the full and colorful force of my indignation with impunity; I was anonymous. But here, I have to be a little more careful.

Now I like to think of myself as a nice person. I try to love people and treat them with respect. But I confess that there are some people I struggle to love. Annoying drivers are one. Time Warner customer service is another. I made the mistake of calling them yesterday. After multiple transfers and being put on hold for an hour, only to be told the exact opposite of what I had previously been told, I think I may have eventually been rerouted to Dante’s inner circle of hell. Judas says hi.

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, a slave owner. 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 synagogue in exchange for loyalty and public support.

These may also be the same leaders who criticized Jesus not long ago for healing on the Sabbath and for forgiving sins. They had no interest in Jesus’ healing when it was for crowds of poor people creating traffic and noise in their small fishing 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, of his time and energy, of his love. He’s worthy because of this system of patronage, 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 he’s called to do.

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*, in the same way that we call Episcopalians "Episcopalians" because they have bishops. 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 are inclusive. We want and 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 kinds of people. And just this past Sunday, where were we but with more than a hundred of this city's hungry, feeding them and getting to know them? We like the idea of loving people who are different from us; we will stand up and fight for this idea.

Yet if you take a look at most Presbyterian churches, 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, wealth, 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 on a matter of principle 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.

The distance is not gone. Jesus is still on the road; he's no where 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.