

THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Text: St. Matthew 8:1-13

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

God loves, not because we deserve His love, not because we are bad or good, not because we are Jew or Gentile, believers or unbelievers, nor for any quality or merit within us. God does not even love because of the quality of one's faith. God loves because He is God, and God, above all things, is love.

Therefore, JESUS' response to the leper and the centurion was fundamentally the same; He responded with compassion, mercy, and love. They received what they requested—healing for both the leper and the centurion's slave.

Both men approached JESUS in the same way, neither making demands of Him. They came reverently, worshipfully, and most importantly, in humble faith. We are not told just when these two men, from opposite cultures and opposing backgrounds, came to faith, nor does that matter. What mattered was the object of their faith, JESUS CHRIST.

The leper fell down before CHRIST, worshiping Him and imploring Him to make him clean by healing the disease that separated him from family, from friends, and from God Himself. For, as a leper, he was a social outcast, unable to enjoy the love and care of family and friends. His life was devoid of even the most fundamental of human needs—contact with other human beings.

The leper had been canceled if you will, by the Levitical cleanliness laws, laws which state that a leper must avoid all contact with other people. Lepers were required to rend their garments, cover their faces, and even forego everyday, hygiene. When they approached others they were to cry out "*Unclean, unclean!*" They were to be isolated from both God and men, neither to receive the love of God through worship, nor the love of family and friends through touch or compassion.

The centurion had no disease, he was a man of power. His uncleanness was the result of being a gentile—he was of the wrong race and lineage. His ancestry separated him from God and God's people. Even so, he loved God, respected the Jews, and followed their religion. He even financed the building of Capernaum's synagogue. He may not have been a seed of Abraham by blood, nonetheless, he was Abraham's child and heir by faith.

The faith of the leper and the centurion was the same. Their faith was *“the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,”* and so they placed their trust, their circumstances, and their desires completely in the hands of God, believing in the authority of His Word and knowing that God does all things well. Into His hands they commended all things, trusting in His mercy and love.

Who here can make the same claim? Repent! Your thoughts are not God’s thoughts, and your ways are not God’s ways. *“For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are [God’s] ways higher than your ways, And [His] thoughts than your thoughts.”* You complain against your God. You prefer the cucumbers of Egypt and the slavery of Pharaoh. You are never content with what you have, and accuse God of cheating you by not giving you nearly enough of what you think you need. You fear for your future and grasp tightly the past, but the past cannot save you. Only trust in JESUS can do that!

Only trust in JESUS to do what He has promised, only trust in JESUS and His Word can save you. Only trust in whatever answer your prayers receive from God can help and comfort you. God answers all prayer and gives to His children according to His will what they need not necessarily what they desire.

Do you believe you have great faith? Great faith echoes the words of the leper, *“LORD, if You are willing, You can make me clean.”* Such faith acknowledges that all authority in Heaven and on earth resides in our LORD JESUS. Such faith is bold and not timid.

Great faith echoes the words of the centurion, *“LORD, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed.”* Such faith yields to the power and authority of the Word of CHRIST to accomplish what He sends it out to do.

This, dear ones, is to be your faith, faith that lays hold of JESUS and will not let Him go, a faith that wrestles with God and will not release Him until it receives God’s blessing. This is a faith that knows that the only place true help is to be found in the Word and promises of JESUS. This is a faith that trusts JESUS enough to pray, *“Thy will be done,”* knowing that God’s will is always best. This is a faith that does not think of itself in terms of greatness but in terms of the greatness of the One in whom it resides—JESUS.

Great faith knows that it is weak and implores JESUS, *“LORD, I believe; help my unbelief!”* Such faith does not place confidence in itself, but in CHRIST alone. This is a faith that often doubts, and often wonders if it exists at all. Yet, such faith also knows that to look for answers to such questions in the human heart is a fool’s errand. For our

hearts are fickle and full of deceit. Look in the human heart long enough and all hope and faith will fade.

Therefore, great faith knows that it will not find the decision and strength to believe in the human heart. It prays to God, *“LORD, if You are willing, You can make me clean”* and confidently leaves the decision to CHRIST. This faith waits upon the Word of the LORD, *“I am willing; be cleansed.”*

This is our LORD’s loving and merciful answer to faith, great and small. Whether you have the great faith of the centurion or faith the size of a mustard seed this is always JESUS’ answer to a prayer of faith. It is for this purpose He died; for this purpose, He gave up His life so that we may be cleansed. JESUS answers and grants your request in Water and Blood that rushes forth from His pierced side—Water that fills the font and in which you were baptized, and Blood which fills the Cup from which He bids you drink. These are the means through which He grants and sustains faith.

Our LORD’S mercy is far greater than our little faith. As evidence of this, we need only stand at the foot of His Cross and look up into the bloody, bruised, and broken face of God. JESUS died upon that Cross, not because we are worthy but because He is the love and mercy of God in Human flesh come to redeem us from Satan and save us from sin, death, and the grave.

With the Body He gave unto death and the Blood He poured out upon the ground, JESUS has forever satisfied the wrath of God, having paid the wages of our sin. Placed upon your tongue, the touch of that very same Body and Blood, faithfully received in and with the elements of bread and wine, cleanse and purify you, body and soul, in a divine exchange—your sin for His sinlessness, your unrighteousness for His righteousness, your death for His life.

Here, at this altar and thousands more like it you are cleansed. Here Jesus reaches out and touches you saying, *“I am willing; be cleansed.”*

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

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