

Sermon Notes for 5/29/16 (Pentecost 2, Mem. Day)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Luke 7:1-10

Theme: WHO DESERVES WHAT – AND WHY IT MATTERS

The Point: Jesus does not do “miracle triage” based on who is most deserving of His mercy, but He cares for all the lost and undeserving with an abundance of grace.

Introduction: Today’s Gospel lesson helps us to come to grips with the question of WHO DESERVES WHAT – AND WHY IT MATTERS. This question of who deserves what is something that surfaces quite often as we consider life and its direction. What sorts of expressions do people use, that indicate this concern hovers quite close to the surface? “What did he do to deserve that?” “Did they really deserve to go through this?” “Did his behavior justify what he received in return?” “Of course, she earned that promotion, unlike so-and-so.” The disciples asked it about the blind man: “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

This whole question of who deserves what seems to hinge on our conviction that there is something known as “justice” or “fairness,” by which actions, words and even thoughts can be judged. The author of Proverbs (14:14) puts it like this: “The perverse get what their ways deserve, and the good, what their deeds deserve.” I have heard it said (and I believe it) that the whole working of the law can be summarized this way: “Behavior has consequences.”

Remember Nathan’s approach to King David, after the affair with Bathsheba? Nathan told the story about the wealthy man who, to feed his out-of-town company, did not take anything from his own multitudes of flocks and herds, but stole his neighbor’s sole lamb, the one he loved and treasured. After hearing this horrendous tale, David said to Nathan, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die” (2 Sam. 12:5). David was right. Behavior has consequences. Live as a greedy, covetous, grasping, vicious individual, and you will receive your just deserts. Of course, David had to be told that the story was really his story, and that he was the one deserving death, not just temporally, but eternally as well. David deserved to die, but the death that took place (besides that of Uriah) was the death of the child of David and Bathsheba. Who would dare to say that this poor child deserved to die?

Of course, we know also that the consequences are not always one-to-one. Sometimes little children die. Sometimes criminals get away with their horrendous behavior. Sometimes people who are law-abiding and obedient still suffer pain and trouble in their lives. So the Law does not “work” perfectly, nor is it sufficient to explain everything that happens in our lives or the lives of others around us. But, because behavior has consequences, we often expect that everything that happens comes as a direct result of what a person has earned or deserved. But this Gospel account has another story to tell, doesn’t it?

We come to the city of Capernaum. This city sat right on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, in the northern territory of the land of Palestine or Israel. It was selected by Jesus as His headquarters while He carried out His preaching, teaching, and healing mission in the area of Galilee. That decision kept Him out of the direct influence of the center of Jewish orthodoxy in Jerusalem. In Capernaum resides a Roman garrison, a unit of the Roman army, headed by a centurion. History tells us that the centurions of the Roman army were typically some of the best of the best of the emperor’s military. That seems to be an apt description of this man. Quite often, occupying armies and their leaders are not viewed favorably by the populace. But this man has a good reputation with the townsfolk of Capernaum.

Interestingly, this man seems to be socially sensitive, with excellent cross-cultural knowledge and skills. Not all slave owners would take the extraordinary steps he takes to try to find healing for his slave. Often,

if a slave was at the point of death, the master would simply arrange to have him replaced. But see what lengths this man goes to on his servant's behalf! He chooses Jewish elders to go to Jesus with an appeal on behalf of this highly valued slave, who was on the verge of death. As they inform Jesus about the need of the centurion's slave, they add, "He [that is, the centurion who is making this request] is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us."

In the minds of these elders, this foreigner deserved good and decent treatment, since he had shown kindness and generosity toward the people of the city. This extended even to the point of building their synagogue for them. In other words, he probably provided much of the funding needed to build a synagogue in the city. Whether this was because the man thought it was a politically and socially shrewd move or because he was attracted to the Jewish faith or for some other reason, we are not told. The thing was that it duly impressed the elders of the city.

Do we use our own sense of worthiness in our appeals to God? God, I have been coming to church every week for decades and decades. Don't I deserve some measure of attention in this matter for which I pray? Lord, I am a member of this or that party or group and have therefore placed myself into a stance of caring for others or upholding justice or maintaining traditions or getting people to move forward. Surely there is some response that you ought to give me to show Your favor! Heavenly Father, You know all the many ways I have served You over the years; now just let me have what I want when I want it. We are often impressed by shows of piety – especially our own.

But Jesus is not impressed by such shows of piety. Luke seems to go out of the way to tell us, after this appeal, "AND Jesus went with them." He does not say "THEREFORE Jesus went with them," but just AND. Jesus did not even respond verbally to the words that the Jewish elders spoke to Him, at least not directly. But He got up and traveled with them on their way back to the centurion's home. It was probably in a different part of town, and so they had a little way to walk. As they walk along, perhaps some of those elders thought they had scored points with Jesus, talking about the merits of the centurion.

This is hardly the case. However, there is something about this man that does impress Jesus. While the retinue was on the road back to the centurion's home, the centurion "sent friends" (not, this time, Jewish elders, but those who knew him well – perhaps better than the elders who spoke of his "deserving" Jesus' healing of his slave). These friends brought this quote from the soldier: "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."

Not only did this man see himself as unworthy of having his servant healed. He did not even see himself as worthy of having Jesus come to his home. After all, since Jesus was a Jewish rabbi, it would have been culturally unseemly for Him to appear in the home of a Gentile. So the centurion relieves Jesus of the pressure to show up in his home to heal the slave. He says it would have been presumptuous on his part even to come to Jesus himself – that is why he sent envoys. He didn't want Jesus to feel some sort of obligation due to his own standing as a Roman centurion.

The centurion did not appeal to Jesus based on his good deeds and his favor with the populace of Galilee. He did not come to the Lord thinking about what he deserved to get from Jesus. He came with a consciousness of the depth of his need – and the greatness of Jesus' power. He came, staking the life of his slave on the grace and mercy of this itinerant rabbi. In his appeal we hear echoes of the publican's cry, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." This man did not come with puffed-out chest, showing his medals. He did not try to pull any rank on Jesus. He had no pretenses about being worthy of God's favor or attention. He simply laid out the deep, deep need that he was aware of, leaving it to Jesus to determine how and when He would respond.

The way the centurion expressed this was unique. “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.” This centurion was placing himself under the authority of Jesus. And as a military commander, he knew well what authority was all about. He could command men right and left and be confident that his orders would be obeyed. But here he simply acknowledges that Jesus’ word was more powerful than his own. He could not command the sickness, “Leave my slave.” But he confesses that Jesus could. Jesus had no military or civil or governmental or medical standing, and yet this man admitted that his authority was no match for that of Jesus, the rabbi from Nazareth.

And here is what impressed Jesus about this centurion. He said to the crowd around Him, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” Jesus commended the man, not for his military prowess, not for his ability to run his household or his cohort of soldiers, not for his knowledge of cultures and morés, not even for his generosity. No, what amazed Jesus was the faith that this man showed. And as the centurion would have readily admitted, such faith was not some superhuman effort that the man exerted. It was the pull of the Holy Spirit upon his heart so that he worshiped and praised Jesus.

Jesus does not dole out miracles according to merit. If He did, none of us would be in good standing, for we have all sinned and opposed God every day of our lives in many different ways. And yet the psalmist assures us (Ps. 103:10), “He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.” He does not give us what we deserve. Instead, He gives us what we could never earn.

People have made this distinction between mercy and grace: Mercy, it is said, is not getting what we do deserve, while grace is getting what we do not deserve. In this sense, our Lord has been most gracious and merciful to us. We have not gotten the judgment and punishment we deserved. Instead, that has been handed out in full measure to Jesus, who endured whip and thorn and nail and spear for us. But we HAVE received what we have in no wise deserved, God’s love and favor, His forgiveness and the gift of eternal life through faith in the Savior Jesus.

It is only in Jesus that we find one who alone deserved God’s favor and approval. As Pilate said several times during Jesus’ trial, “I find no fault in this man.” And as the thief put it from the cross next to Jesus (Lk. 23:41), speaking to his fellow-thief on the far side, “And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Jesus deserved to live, but He willingly laid down His life in death. We deserved to die, but through faith in His name, we are set free from the threat and torment of eternal death.

Solomon prayed at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem in words that remembered that God’s grace is for all people in every nation. He prayed that God would hear the foreigner who prayed toward the temple, “so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you.” So that is our motivation in serving our Lord, not that we would earn merits before the Lord, but that all people might know that Jesus’ name is above all and that in worshiping Him they would know forgiveness and hope.

Conclusion: Jesus does not do “miracle triage” based on who is most deserving of His mercy, but He cares for all the lost and undeserving with an abundance of grace. We see that in His miracles of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. Heaven’s arches ring with joy over the repentance of one sinner. Christ’s whole mission is built on calling the lost and undeserving to Himself. And once we have tasted this marvelous gift, we also have the joy of passing on the Good News to others who are wondering how they can be sure of joy and peace and life. In Jesus’ precious name, AMEN!