

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

*“To be or not to be, that is the question,”* Hamlet soliloquizes as ponders death. But the question before us today is *“Worthy or unworthy?”* And there seems to be a bit of confusion in the text regarding the answer.

Now we live in a merit-driven world; surely there is no surprise there. It’s not the child with the worst grades that receives the end-of-year awards, but the child with best. It’s not the student with the lowest GPA that gets the scholarship offers but the one with the highest. It’s not the slowest athlete that receives the medal but the fastest. It’s not the mediocre applicant that gets the job but the superior. It’s not the undeserving employee that gets the raise, but the deserving. It’s not the unworthy soldier that receives an honor but the worthy. It’s not the least generous donor that gets his name on a building but the most generous. That’s how worthiness is most often measured in the world, and we’re pretty comfortable with that arrangement. Has it ever really been any different? But how about before God?

Today, we meet Jesus in Capernaum, and there’s no question about His worthiness. He had just finished some of His most famous preaching, and He had been doing some pretty amazing things: casting out demons, healing the sick, cleansing lepers, causing paralytics to walk, restoring withered hands—pretty impressive stuff.

We meet also a Roman centurion. Now he definitely had some strikes against him on his résumé. He was a Gentile, for one thing. That didn’t endear him to the Jews. And he was a soldier in an occupying army. That didn’t make him popular either. Unworthy most of the Jews would count him.

He had heard of Jesus, though, and because he had a servant boy, who was sick and close to death, sent for Jesus in his time of need. Of course, he didn’t do it himself; no...too undeserving. So, understandably he sent some Jews to Jesus, and not just Jews, Jews of some stature, elders of the Jews, religious men with some standing in the community.

They pleaded with Jesus: *“Come and heal this man’s servant!”* Why? *“Because he’s worthy; he deserves it. Because he loves our nation. Because he built us our synagogue.”*

Now don’t be fooled. Jesus isn’t buying any of this “worthiness” line that the religious leaders were spouting, even though He went with them to see the centurion. Much like Jesus’ famous parable that He told about the Pharisee and the tax collector, it was not the supposed worthy one, in that case the one who thought himself righteous and who spouted all sorts of accomplishments to prove it, who

went home justified. Rather, it was a man in another despised group: the tax collector, who considered himself unworthy, a sinner, who merely cried out to the Lord for mercy. He went home justified, accounted worthy.

So it was for the centurion, for as Jesus approached the centurion's home, the Roman soldier sent more people out to meet Jesus, some friends, to speak for him. And here we hear what the centurion really thought. Not worthy...not even to have Jesus enter his house, certainly not to meet Him face to face. Unworthy!

How about you? Who are you, sitting out there in that pew? Worthy or unworthy? Oh, you're a multi-generation Lutheran? Oh, you contribute generously, a tithe and more than a tithe? Oh, you've given a big gift and had something named after you? Oh, you're a leader in the congregation? — the pastor, or president, or elder? Oh, you work in a pregnancy center, you tell others about Jesus, you pray? Do any of those things make you worthy? Do you not believe what you just confessed before God — *“all [your] sins and iniquities with which [you] have ever offended [Him] and justly deserved [His] temporal and eternal punishment”*?

We are all unworthy sinners, not coming close to the unyielding standard of perfection required for salvation, not meriting one bit of the grace that God so generously bestows on us. That's why it's called grace, because it's not a function of our unworthy works.

Although unworthy, the centurion called out to Jesus for mercy for his servant. He believed in Jesus. He knew what Jesus had done; he trusted what He could do. *“Only speak the word, Jesus, and my servant will be healed. As I am a man under authority who exercises authority, I know You have authority over demons, over all sorts of illnesses, over withered legs and hands. I know You can heal my servant. Just speak the word.”*

Jesus commended his faith, and his servant was healed.

The healing we need may be different today. It could be a physical healing — pray for that, and trust that Jesus hears our prayers and answers them as is best for us. He also promises that He will not turn us away in anger; He will not cast us off; He will not forsake us; He will take us in. And we trust that *“life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.”*

Yet, more than the physical, we certainly have need of spiritual healing. We unworthy sinners all need the healing that comes with the forgiveness of sins; and that comes with Jesus, earned by the worthy Lamb that was slain, who *“by [His] blood ... ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and ... made them a kingdom and priests to our God.”* Forgiveness and

healing come as we hear Jesus speak the word to us today, and we place our trust in it.

And in a moment we'll hear Jesus say that His body is given you in the Lord's Supper, His blood shed for you for the forgiveness of Your sins. Trust in that, too, and you who are unworthy, will be counted among the worthy, and you will have what those words say, and more, for where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation. That's right, there in those words attached to bread and wine comes Christ, and there you will find your healing.

So, are you worthy or unworthy? Worthiness in the kingdom of God is diametrically opposed to worthiness in the world. Worthiness in the world is often based on what you do, and the truly worthy are those that have the superlatives attached to them: best, highest, fastest, strongest, greatest, richest, etc. But worthiness in the kingdom comes only from Christ. Worthy is the one who considers his sinful unworthiness and by faith receives the worthiness of Christ

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.