

Worthy and Not Worthy
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I don't know whether any of you have attended a service of ordination according to the practice of the United Church of Christ. I have, and one of them was my own, here in this sanctuary in 1998. Frankly, it can be a long service, and I felt a little sorry for all the nice people here, who had to listen to the many words that make up the liturgy. But at one point, after the ordinand has answered a number of questions, the gathered people are asked, "People of God, you have heard the promises so-and-so has made. What is your will?" And they get to speak (finally) and say, "By the grace of God, she is worthy! Let us ordain her. Come Holy Spirit." It is not often that people say in unison that anyone is "worthy." Imagine hearing a church full of people say it about you. It feels pretty weighty, let me tell you.

Today's Gospel reading set me off on a train of thought about the concepts of worthiness and unworthiness. For millennia, we humans have had experiences of being part of something bigger than ourselves, something that is outside of us, and also, mysteriously, intimately connected to us. This has produced feelings of awe, of euphoria, or fear. We want to bond with this powerful Spirit, and seek even deeper connection. But we are also aware of our frailty and ineffectiveness. Where and how do we connect with this Spirit, this being we call God?

In our reading from the first book of Kings, we find a simple answer: the new temple in Jerusalem. The rich and powerful King Solomon dedicates the temple with a prayer that is more like a to-do list for God. With great pageantry and fanfare, the king (who seems quite assured of his own worthiness) lifts his hands to heaven and reminds God of the covenant with his dynasty, the line of King David. Then he says that the temple is the place that God has named as **the** place to pray: the place from which prayers are heard and answered. When the people are suffering and repentant, **this** is the place where God will really hear, and show mercy. Even when foreigners come to town, **this** is the place where they can make contact with the enormous power that belongs to the God of Israel. This is a holy place, a worthy place, a place to be trusted, this is the way we reach God.

The great crisis for the Jewish people comes when the temple is destroyed, as it has been, more than once. Where is the point of contact then? How can people make themselves worthy of divine notice? Many devout people came to see attention to the laws of Moses as a way to reach God. The Torah was the new locus of holiness. Here was a way to become worthy of God's notice, a way to gain God's ear. Right relations with one neighbors and habits of purity: this was a pathway that could be trusted to bring one close to God.

In many ways, Jesus was spiritually formed by this view. He saw the ways that human relationships could not be separated from personal piety. But he seems to have continued the trajectory of inclusion begun in Solomon's prayer and spoken of by the prophets. In his ministry, inclusion trumped purity, every time. His followers began to see that Jesus himself was a new touching place, a new point of contact with God, superseding the Temple, superseding the Law. The ministry of Jesus was seen as a place of power, not geographically bound, but vibrant, mobile,

and visiting both the worthy and unworthy. His life illustrated a new way to be open to God's grace, and it was compelling to insiders and outsiders alike.

The healing of the centurion's slave brings together an odd cast of characters, and shows a surprising network of relationships. There is the occupying soldier in relationship with natives of the town of Capernaum. And he is in a master-slave relationship, one that involves some tenderness and care. There is his surprising relationship to Jewish elders, who advocate for him. There is the strangeness of Jewish elders coming to seek help from Jesus, whom they normally shunned. There is the conversation, completely through proxies, of the centurion and Jesus, where the soldier both claims unworthiness and claims a common life experience of a "man set under authority." And finally, there is the relationship of the healer and the one to be healed, separated by even more links in the human chain.

The climax of the story comes when Jesus is "amazed" – not something that happens much in this Gospel – and praises the faith of the centurion. Here is where we ask: what was that faith, what did that centurion believe? It would not be faith as belief in certain theological statements. The faith of the centurion was more like recognition and trust and hope: even just through word of mouth, he saw and heard something that gave him hope. He is able to make an analogy with his own lived experience: that of power and authority, that of following orders and being effective. But Jesus' power is different, and therefore more compelling. Military power cannot heal. The centurion knows that military force could not win him the support of the Jewish population. And perhaps he sees that Jesus has tapped into the divine power that works peace and healing, in some ways the mirror image of the imperial authority that defines the centurion's role.

The fact is, worthiness is not the currency of the divine-human relationship: trust is. And it is trust that is the network that holds this strange cast of characters together. Something formed the bond between the centurion and the elders of Capernaum. Something formed the care of the master for his servant. Something about the reputation and words of Jesus that inspired the centurion to lower himself and ask for help. Something allowed the Jewish elders to break their habit and go to Jesus. Something inspired the centurion to send a second delegation, trying to find a common language and a bond with the traveling healer. We could call it faith, we could call it a new way of touching God.

Jesus did not seem to care whether the centurion, or his slave, was worthy or unworthy. Location didn't matter, religion didn't matter, rules didn't matter. So perhaps we can also let go of our own worries and assumptions about whether we are worthy of God's love, or whether a "foreigner" is. Maybe we can just acknowledge and celebrate and revel in the networks we enjoy: opportunities for trust, opportunities to connect with a loving and healing power.

A writer named Brennan Manning wrote: *"The splendor of a human heart that trusts it is loved unconditionally gives God more pleasure than Westminster Cathedral, the Sistine Chapel, Beethoven's 'Ninth Symphony', Van Gogh's 'Sunflowers', the sight of 10,000 butterflies in flight, or the scent of a million orchids in bloom. Trust is our gift back to God."*

Some people seem to be born with this kind of faith or trust in God; others need some time to learn it. Maybe it depends on where in the network we have been placed. Some people move from place to place in this geography of grace, seeking connection through a building or a code of conduct, seeking worthiness in their own eyes or others. The Good News is: God is not waiting for

us to become worthy. Jesus showed us that God has already started off down the road to offer us healing.

In a little while we will share in the sacrament of Holy Communion. In some liturgical traditions, one would pray these words as one prepared to receive the bread and cup: “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I will be healed.” When those words are said, the worshipper stands with the centurion, acknowledging that we have a sense at times of being outside the circle, outside the reach of divine power, distant from healing. But then we are drawn in, drawn into a family, drawn to a table, touched by trust. In this there is the joy of overcoming the categories of worth, and basking in God’s unconditional love. There is the joy of living in connection with a strange cast of characters, bound by mutual trust and mutual need. There is joy in the mysterious alchemy of faith, that sends us out to seek the divine in new places, with new friends.

Amen.