

Jesus Manifests His Gracious Authority

Matthew 8:1-13

by Rev. Michael G. Lilienthal

Hymn: ELH #591 – “May God Bestow on Us His Grace”

Prayer: Precious Savior, grant me full confidence in the power of your Word. Give me faith in your grace. Lead me to hope with great anticipation for that day when you will heal every illness. In your gracious name I pray. Amen.

When Jesus came down from the mountain, large crowds followed him. ²Just then, a leper came to him and bowed down to him, saying, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.”

³Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean.” Immediately he was healed of his leprosy. ⁴Jesus said to him, “See that you tell no one. Instead, go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”

⁵When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him and pleaded with him, ⁶“Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed and suffering terribly.”

⁷Jesus said to him, “I will come and heal him.”

⁸The centurion answered, “Lord, I am not worthy for you to come under my roof. But only say the word, and my servant will be healed.

⁹For I am also a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I say to this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

¹⁰When Jesus heard this, he marveled. He said to those who were following him, “Amen I tell you: I have not found such great faith in anyone in Israel. ¹¹I tell you that many will come from the east and the west and will recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. ¹²But the children of the kingdom will be thrown out into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

¹³Jesus said to the centurion, “Go. Let it be done for you as you have believed.” And his servant was healed at that very hour.

Dear faithful,

Appointed for us today are two accounts of faithful believers in Jesus, faithful petitioners, people who knew that he could help, who asked him for help, and who

received the help he freely gave. Just prior to this reading ended an iconic portion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: as this text notes, “Jesus came down from the mountain,” meaning he came down from the mountain where he had just delivered his famous Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew chapters 5-7. At the end of the sermon, Matthew interjects: “And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching as one who had authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt. 7:28-29, ESV).

Noticeably, these two individuals were outside the normal group of God’s people: the first, a leper, was unclean, consigned to live outside the camp, separated from the general population; the second, a Roman centurion, was a Gentile, by definition *not* one of the people of God. However, their stories are brought out by St. Matthew in his Gospel in order to present how **Jesus manifests his gracious authority** toward even the unclean and Gentiles, **so that his authority is recognized by sinners**, authority which is **demonstrated in mercy toward sinners**.

I. So That It Is Recognized by Sinners

Those crowds reacted to Jesus’ authority by being “astonished” (7:28, ESV). They reacted to Jesus as we might react to a display of fireworks: *Wow! That’s amazing!* And then we go about our lives, and nothing has changed. Or perhaps, to give them the benefit of the doubt, they were amazed, and knew that something wonderful was happening before their eyes, but they didn’t know what it was. Matthew’s readers, too, may have a similar reaction: they’ve heard about this Jesus, that there is something truly wonderful about him, but *what* exactly?

Jesus, who preaches and acts as though he has authority, not only has it, but here before us “exercises his authority for the benefit of those in need.”¹ The leper, firstly, stands out from this crowd as one who not only stands in awe, but understands that the authority of Jesus means the authority to cleanse him of his disease. The leper believes this, and it is in this confident belief that he approaches Jesus. Perhaps the words of Jesus’ sermon rang out in his ears: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (Matt. 5:3, 6, ESV); or perhaps: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened” (Matt. 7:7-8, ESV). Hear, therefore, what the leper said: “Just then, a leper came to him and bowed down to him, saying, ‘Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.’”

What a faithful prayer! If only we could pray as faithfully and boldly before our Lord! The leper “bowed down,” he fell on his knees, he worshiped! The leper acknowledged Jesus as his superior, precisely because he demonstrated great spiritual authority. Do we acknowledge our Lord as our superior, or isn’t it often the case that we come before him in prayers that demand what *we* want? Our sinful nature likes to grab onto that passage from Jesus’ authority-filled sermon – “Ask, and it will be given to you” (Matt. 7:7, ESV) – and to think, “See, God, you *have* to give me what I ask for!” Oh, but we won’t be unreasonable. We’re not going to ask for a million dollars, and

¹ Gibbs 410.

we're not going to ask for some great global miracle of weather, we'll ask for modest things: We want happy family gatherings; we want a good day at school or work; we want the heathen of our nation to see the wickedness of their ways and to be knocked low; we want working home appliances; we want certain small, material goods – things that won't inconvenience God too much. Just health. Just time to balance all our obligations. Just enough money to buy groceries, pay the mortgage and a couple of bills, and then maybe a little left over for something fun.

But hear again this leper: "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." The leper's request isn't even phrased as a request, but more as a confession of his faith. He does not even dare to say, "Lord, please make me clean." Instead, he confesses, "I know and believe that you can make me clean, if it is your desire to do so." Compare this to the centurion: he, too, did not initially ask anything, but instead merely stated his complaint: "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed and suffering terribly." Now, this centurion likely was not present among the crowds who heard Jesus' sermon, but he no doubt had heard, and himself recognized that Jesus was one who had great authority. Therefore he, a Gentile, and a high-ranking soldier, addressed Jesus as "Lord." And not only is he a powerful Lord, but the centurion knows, as the leper knows, that Jesus is a *gracious* Lord. Nevertheless, he does not dare to ask that Jesus heal his servant until Jesus himself offers, and *Jesus* says: "I will come and heal him"! It is then, when the centurion knows that Jesus is willing to help, that he shows immense faith and humility as he understands Jesus' authority: "Lord, I am not worthy for you to come under my roof. But only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I am

also a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

From experience, the soldier understands what authority means: Jesus, he knows, has authority over illness and disease – indeed over creation – so just as he, an officer, does not have to be present for his orders to be accomplished, neither does Jesus need to be present for his orders to be accomplished. He merely needs to issue the command, and it will be done.

This is the great faith of the centurion. Jesus, who is willing to help, also *can* help, and the soldier believes in this gracious authority of Jesus. This is what faith means: not only to believe that our Lord has authority over all creation, authority to do anything, but also to believe that he wishes to, and will, do what is good for us. Here is another place where we often fall short, don't we? We believe in God's authority, but do we believe that he will do what is good for us? We hear St. Paul's words ringing in our ears: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28, ESV). But do we believe it? Instead, we don't see God answering our prayers. We see things getting worse. Then we start to think that the one who said, "Ask, and it will be given to you" (Matt. 7:7, ESV), was lying, or at least not telling us the whole truth.

Dearly beloved, take the example of these two faithful people. Like the leper, pray, "If you are willing," and like the centurion, confess, "I am not worthy." This is faith which acknowledges the authority of the one to whom we speak, and also acknowledges his mercy and care. To the faith of the centurion, Jesus marveled and

announced, "Amen I tell you: I have not found such great faith in anyone in Israel. I tell you that many will come from the east and the west and will recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom will be thrown out into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Here is a real lesson for us: "Many will come from the east and the west," said Jesus, from Rome and from Persia, from Asia and Gaul, from Africa and China, from all over the world, everywhere that is *not* Israel, and those outsiders, those non-Jews, those *Gentiles* "will recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven," and what of the Jews? "But the children of the kingdom will be thrown out into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." The message is the same as what John the Baptist declared: "And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham" (Matt. 3:9, ESV). Based on Jesus' warning, therefore, we must not assume that anything secures us a good standing in the eyes of God. This is the wrong attitude that demands from God, that calls God a liar for not giving in when we throw a fit. The right attitude, the attitude of the leper and the centurion, is the knowledge that there is absolutely nothing in us that guarantees us a good standing before God; the only thing that guarantees us a good standing in the eyes of God is precisely what he has promised to us.

II. Demonstrated in Mercy Toward Sinners

And blessed sinners, he has promised us great things. We can see the example in the story of the leper and the centurion, how Jesus told the one, “I am willing,” and demonstrated his mercy in a miracle of healing, and to the other he said, “Go. Let it be done for you as you have believed,” demonstrating his marvelous authority over creation even at a distance by a miracle of mercy. The text itself, and the people involved, explicitly deny that the recipients of these miracles have any right to expect them. Instead, they rely on Jesus’ mercy.

Consider what we sing in the hymn which paraphrases portions of this text:

There many shall come from the east and the west
And sit at the feast of salvation
With Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the blest,
Obeying the Lord's invitation.
Have mercy upon us, O Jesus!²

This hymn confesses beautifully the very faith we see demonstrated by these two individuals, and exactly the grace bestowed by our Lord: it comes with that last and repeated line, “Have mercy upon us, O Jesus!” With these words, we understand how undeserving we are, and how reliant we are upon the gracious disposal of our Lord. This is what gives us the right to come to “the feast of salvation.”

Here, and only here, is our confidence. While we must not be bold and brazen before our Lord, pronouncing our demands as though he is our lackey, we may and should be bold and confident before him as we ask him to fulfill what he has promised,

² ELH #200:1.

what his Son has won for us, standing tall in his grace. This is what St. Paul declared, as he discussed whether there was any occasion for man to boast: “And he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will be glad to boast all the more in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may shelter me” (2 Cor. 12:9). The perspective we should learn from this Gospel of Jesus Christ, our Savior, is that while we are sinful and wicked enemies of God, he loves us gives himself for us, puts his omnipotence to work for our benefit, to bring us to life with him. In short, we rejoice to know that the gifts we receive from God are given although we are undeserving.

This is the epiphany of our Lord for this week. He is revealed as almighty God, but a God of grace, and grace for the whole world, for Jesus prophetically invites: “many will come from the east and the west and will recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.” It is Jesus’ gracious, saving authority that is “the basis for the mission to make disciples of all nations through baptizing and teaching.”³ He declared at his ascension, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go *therefore* and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:18-19, ESV). Because he accomplished his gracious mission of salvation, fulfilling the law by his life and suffering our punishment by his death on the cross, and by his resurrection took back his authority over creation, his grace may be revealed to all nations. *All* are therefore invited to come to “the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom

³ Gibbs 419.

of heaven," the banquet which is elsewhere described by Jesus' as a wedding banquet.

We sing of this in that same hymn:

God grant that I may of His infinite love
Remain in His merciful keeping;
And sit with the King at His table above,
When here in the grave I am sleeping.
Have mercy upon us, O Jesus!

All trials are then like a dream that is past,
Forgotten all trouble and sorrow;
All questions and doubts have been answered at last;
Then dawneth eternity's morrow.
Have mercy upon us, O Jesus!

The heavens shall ring with an anthem more grand
Than ever on earth was recorded;
The blest of the Lord shall receive at His hand
The crown to the victors awarded.
Have mercy upon us, O Jesus!⁴

Still today we pray for this grace and mercy. Notice how often we refer to it in our prayers in the Confession of Sin in our liturgies. Every part of our worship and life is in anticipation of this gracious banquet promised, including the Lord's Supper, which is a precious glimpse of the final heavenly supper. We receive there the body our God sacrificed in his grace, the blood he shed in his mercy, demonstrating his authority even over death by handing his soul into Death's arms, and then breaking Death's teeth by bursting to life on Easter morning. If we would doubt our Lord when he tells us, "I am willing," willing to give us *everything*, we have only to look at this highest and most wonderful gift on this altar: an altar where no more sacrifice is offered up to God, but

⁴ ELH #200:5-7.

instead, God in his authority has ordained to give us, miraculously, the body and blood of his Son. I urge you, therefore, dear Christians, seek this gift, as often as possible, for it is proof that our Lord loves us, that he *has* forgiven us all our sins, and still, even now, continues to forgive us over and over. Who would not wish to receive tangible forgiveness, tasted and felt, whenever possible?

You are blessed to know that your Lord offers you this forgiveness and mercy in his authority. You are the faithful beloved of the Lord, and invited to his table. He has revealed himself to you in this way, and asks you to seek him in the confidence that his grace bestows.

Amen.

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