

Lord, Just Say the Word!

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon Text: Matthew 8:5-13



When He entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to Him, appealing to Him, ⁶“Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.” ⁷And He said to him, “I will come and heal him.” ⁸But the centurion replied, “Lord, I am not worthy to have You come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹For I too am a man 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 servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” ¹⁰

When Jesus heard this, He marveled and said to those who followed Him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. ¹¹I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, ¹²while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” ¹³And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed at that very moment.

The Roman centurion in Capernaum knew that the command of a Roman officer was iron law which was punishable by death if one didn't obey it. That's why this Roman officer knew that his word was effective even when he wasn't present. A command to his servant was enough to satisfy his every wish. One could get used to such power! You just speak and everything is brought to you! But a Roman officer was not omnipotent. His power had limits and he noticed that when his servant became sick. Because he really cared for this servant, he undoubtedly tried all kinds of remedies that promised healing. But nothing happened. The servant didn't get better. Things only got worse. And then he heard about Jesus. He heard that Jesus healed sick people. That's why he called to Jesus. He did that even though it was certainly unusual at that time for a Roman officer to ask a wandering Jewish preacher into his home. He had to have really cared for his servant! And Jesus wanted to help and immediately set out. But the real miracle of the story actually began only then. When he realized that Jesus would come into his house, the officer hesitated for a unique reason. He considered himself underserving and unworthy of letting Jesus into his home. At least now we realize that this Roman officer knew more about Jesus than initially thought. Not only did he recognize that he had no power himself, he also recognized that he didn't deserve the Son of God to come into his home. “Lord, I am not worthy to have You come under my roof.” Since God is omnipotent, perfect, and holy, then we are completely unworthy because we aren't any of these things. The Roman officer also recognized this. He could have reacted completely differently: for example, he could have said: “I have helped many Jews and I am normally a good man. Jesus has to come on command.” But then that wouldn't be a prayer. Many people pray like this. They act as if God must answer prayers because we're good people. Then that wouldn't be a prayer but a type of self-justification! I can't pray to God and at the same time look to my own accomplishments and potential. Rather, the opposite is true. I realize that I have no power. But that doesn't mean that we are

completely powerless. On the contrary! The Roman officer recognized his powerlessness and yet he didn't remain powerless. He knew under whose wings he could cover himself with, who truly has power. He turned to God, whose Word does what He says. And he knew that this God is present in Jesus. And that's why he asked Jesus to only say the word so that his servant may be healed. And that's exactly what immediately happened. Jesus spoke a word of power and the servant was already healed. But the story doesn't come to an end with this. Jesus pauses. He is surprised at the faith of the Roman officer and emphasizes it as an example. You all should believe like this man who, in name, is actually still an unbeliever. When Jesus shows us the faith of this Roman officer, He wants to say something. He wants to show us how we can trust in God and can pray to Him. And Jesus continues, saying: There are many people who say that they believe. But in reality, they don't. They only rely on themselves and think only of their own resources. We are also asked: do we trust in God when we pray? Haven't we already gotten used to the fact that we always pray for the sick, the poor, or the people who hunger while we know that nothing changes? Do we even speak with God when we pray? Or is prayer a type of self-talk that makes me feel better? Perhaps that's also the reason why many people forgot how to pray. When the refrigerator is full, when you have your health, and when there's enough money in your account, then according to this opinion, there's absolutely no reason to pray. On the other hand, some think that prayer is there to help you find yourself. So, they think that through prayer, you look deep inside yourself and through that comes a better understanding of themselves and getting back in control of their lives – so just a type of meditation. That's why they also think that prayer is something that goes on inside us humans.

The Roman officer shows us a completely different approach to prayer. He didn't know anything about the Old Testament, yet he knew about God's power and knew that when Jesus speaks, it happens. And he also knew that such powerful words are in Jesus. With prayer, it's not about me speaking, rather it's about God speaking! If it's about us, we must realize that we remain unworthy servants. We don't have the strength to say words or prayers that will be fulfilled afterwards. Again and again, we pray for the terrible things that happen in our world. But the world isn't getting better. But we are here exactly for this reason. That's exactly why we run to God. We do that because we know about our powerlessness. Martin Luther said in his explanation of the first Commandment: "For to have God, you can easily perceive, is not to lay hold of Him with our hands or to put Him in a bag or to lock Him in a chest." And then he continues: "But to apprehend Him means when the heart lays hold of Him and clings to Him. But to cling to Him with the heart is nothing else than to trust in Him entirely." We have more than enough reasons for us to only rely on God. We have more than enough reasons to see our complete powerlessness. And yet we know that God not only has the power to help. He also wants to help. Lord, just say the word, and the sick will be healed! Lord, just say the word, and the dying will be filled with peace! Lord, just say the word, and the addicts will be free! Lord, just speak Your Word.... Amen.