I have preached on this passage from Luke at least half a dozen times. Every time, I have chosen to focus on the faith of the centurion, who was asking for healing - not for himself, but for his slave. I have spoken about the fact that the centurion was not Jewish, as Jesus was, and yet was bold enough to ask Jesus to heal his servant. I've mentioned that the centurion may have wanted healing for his slave because he loved him or because he simply valued his slave highly, which means the slave was a good and trusted worker that the centurion could not afford to lose. All of sermons I have preached on this text were OK, I think.

This time, something else in the passage caught my attention. It's the word “worthy,”which appears twice in this short passage. The first time the word appears is

when some Jewish elders came to Jesus, as intermediaries for a Roman centurion. The elders spoke highly of the centurion. Luke says, “When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, 'He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and he's the one who built our synagogue.'” The second time the word “worthy” appears is when Jesus was on his way to the centurion's house and some of the centurion's friends approached Jesus on the road and gave Jesus a message from their friend. It was something like “Don't go to any trouble. I'm not worthy to have you come to my house. That's why I sent my friends to meet you before you got to me.”

The dictionary defines “worthy” as *having worth, merit, or value and deserving effort, attention, or respect.* So when the Jewish elders came to Jesus, they described the centurion as one having worth and deserving respect. Somehow, he must have come to know God, but, being a soldier of the Roman army, the centurion most likely practiced his faith quietly outside the synagogue he built. The centurion also knew that it was unlawful for Jews to go into the houses of Gentiles and may have wished to spare Jesus any embarrassment. The centurion showed his great faith partly by believing that Jesus could heal by a word, but chiefly in his lofty conception of Jesus as compared with himself. Clearly, the centurion thought highly of himself and explained through his friends that he was an important man who had many soldiers under his command. But the centurion yielded to Jesus' power and considered himself unworthy to ask a miracle of Jesus face-to-face. The centurion's faith would have been wonderful enough in an Israelite, but it was all the more awesome when found in the heart of a Gentile.

So this Gentile, a high-ranking soldier in the Roman empire was respected by many yet when Jesus started getting closer to his house, the centurion asked him not to come any further. He still wanted Jesus to heal his slave, but to do it from a distance. Jesus considered the centurion's sudden modesty a sign of his great faith, healed the man's slave and went on his way. Jesus never met the centurion or his slave in person, yet performed a mighty miracle because the centurion was worthy of Jesus' healing power.

Is that the way Jesus doles out his healing power, to those who deserve it? If that were true, we would see clear categories into which Jesus puts those who are pleasing to Jesus and those who are not. To be honest, that's the way most of us operate all the time, dividing those whom we think deserve good things from Jesus and those whom we think are unworthy of his love.

But that is not how Jesus sees us. Jesus sees us as cherished sisters and brothers who he wants to heal and restore and give the gift of new life. When we compare our behavior to Old Testament commandments or to Jesus' call to love our neighbor, we all fall woefully short of what Jesus expects from us, but we are not doomed to eternal damnation because Jesus does not measure us on a worthiness scale. Jesus loves us as we are, because that is who Jesus is. Jesus is love, pure and simple. He graces us with love so that we may love others. It doesn't matter who we are, what we have done or thought, we all are gifted with a love so outrageous, so inclusive, so extraordinary, that we can only worship him with thankful hearts.

I recently read that Catholics come to the Lord's table with a prayer that comes straight out of our lesson from Luke. At the beginning of the communion liturgy, the priest holds up the host and says, “Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.” The congregation responds together, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.”

In this instance people are asking the Lord to heal their very souls, their inmost being. They are acknowledging that they are about to receive Jesus under the “roof” of their mouths and thus to welcome Him into their physical abode; into their bodies, the dwelling place of the soul. “Lord, I am not worthy.” If we were honest, that's what we would say to God every time we prepare to eat the bread and drink the cup, shed out of amazing grace, love that never ends.

So when we are preparing to receive the Lord Jesus Christ in a profound way in communion with the most holy one, we can do so filled with anticipation and desire at the very thought of what we are receiving, yet also with an acknowledgment that we are utterly unprepared for such a privileged encounter, for such unconditional grace.

Today, we read a story about a centurion, his friends, his slave, and some Jewish elders. If this were a movie, all these characters would be listed in the credits, but none would get top billing. That spot would belong to Jesus because this story is all about Jesus, who can heal without ever seeing or touching someone who is ill. It's about Jesus, whose is surprised and tickled pink by the faith of those who are not expected to believe in him. This story is about the faith of someone whose talk of love and peace scared the powers that be long ago, and even some of those powers today. It's about Jesus, who submitted to death on the cross to show us the depth of his love for us. The story is about Jesus, who tells us this over and over again: God loves everyone. God works through everyone. God has hopes and dreams for everyone. We may be surprised at who God chooses, who God works through and who God commends. And that's exactly the way God wants it.

|  |
| --- |
|  |

Amen.