

“Three Miracles of Grace”
Sermon Series on *The King and His Kingdom* #5
Dr. Peter Barnes
Frist Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
October 8, 2017
(Mt. 8:1-17)

Introduction.

Have you ever been in a social situation where you were on the outside looking in? Maybe you were the new kid in school, or you moved to a new city. Perhaps you traveled to a foreign country, and you didn't speak the language. How did you feel? Can you remember the emotions and your thoughts about being an outsider?

When I was in the 9th grade, my parents enrolled me and my older brother in a new school, and I didn't know another soul in the whole school. The first day was pretty hard, and I really felt like an outsider. But then on the second day of school a kid named Flip Gallion befriended me, and he decided that I needed some help making new friends. He invited me to sit with him at lunch, and he introduced me to all his buddies. That changed everything. It wasn't long before I was on the inside, and I began to make my way in my new school. I'll always be forever grateful for Flip Gallion who had an eye for the outsider and did what he could to reach out and help me.

Jesus also cared about outsiders, and we read about several instances of it here in our passage this morning. As we consider the first part of Matthew 8, I want you to notice three miracles of grace that happened to three different people who were on the outside looking in.

I. The Healing of the Leper.

“When [Jesus] came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed Him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before Him and said, ‘Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.’ Jesus reached out His hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ He said. ‘Be clean!’ Immediately he was cured of his leprosy” (8:1-3).

In the ancient world leprosy was one of the most terrible diseases of all. One scholar writes, “No other disease reduces a human being for so many years to so hideous a wreck.”¹ Lepers were considered unclean in the community as well as in the eyes of God, and they were regarded by the Jewish people as being under a curse (see Lv. 12-14).

As a result, lepers were required to wear their hair and their clothes in a disheveled manner, to cover their lower lip when people came near, and to cry out

“unclean, unclean” in order to signal to other people they had leprosy. This would help keep the community from physical and spiritual contamination. Of all the people in ancient Israel, you could argue that lepers were the most excluded and ostracized. They were forbidden from even entering the walled cities in Israel, and they were especially forbidden from going to Jerusalem or entering the Temple. Lepers were the classic outsiders in Jewish society.

It’s important to note that the term “leprosy” in the Bible actually covered a number of additional diseases other than what we would strictly call leprosy today, or, as it is known in medical science, Hansen’s Disease. A variety of skin diseases were also grouped under the general term “leprosy” in the ancient world.

We’re told in our passage that as Jesus came down the mountainside after preaching the Sermon on the Mount, a man with leprosy approached Him. NT scholar Dale Bruner has written² that there are three things we should notice about this leper. First, note his **humility**. “*A man with leprosy came and knelt before [Jesus]*” (8:2). He didn’t demand healing. He knelt and humbly asked for it. It was as if he said, “I know I don’t really matter very much, and I know that other people will run away from me, and I also know I have no claim on you, Jesus. But will you show me some compassion today and help a person like me?”

Next, notice the leper’s **reverence**. The Greek verb which is translated “knelt before” is the word *proskunein*. It’s a word that is never used in the Bible of anything but the worship of God. It always describes the actions and feelings of a person when they are in the presence of holiness. This leper acknowledged his belief in the divinity of Jesus, and he knelt to worship Christ.

And third, notice the leper’s **confident trust in Jesus**. “*Lord, if you are willing You can make me clean*” (8:2). He had absolutely no doubt that Jesus had the ability to heal his illness. Leprosy was the one disease for which there was no prescribed rabbinic remedy, and yet this man was sure that Jesus could do what no one else in Israel was able to do.

Next Matthew tells us, “*And Jesus reached out His hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ He said. ‘Be clean!’*” (8:3). If Jesus had pulled away when the leper approached Him and if He had only spoken the words of this healing from a distance, this would be a different miracle. But Jesus touched this man even before Jesus spoke, and this should teach all of us something about how we should reach out to people in the name of Christ. Touch preceded word, and it reinforces the truth that people who are hurting need the ministry of physical touch. When Jesus reached out and touched the leper, He gave us a great example.

Mother Teresa is probably the person who reflected this characteristic of Christ more than any other individual in our generation. I will forever see in my mind a picture of this tiny nun from Albania, a woman who barely stood 5-feet-tall, holding in her arms an emaciated and dying old man in the streets of Calcutta,

India. I believe that the poor and the dying of the world, the rejected and the outcast, have not felt the touch of Christ from anyone as much as they did from this woman of God who was used in such a mighty way by the Lord. And because of the faithfulness of her touch, whenever she spoke, people sat up and took notice, because the power of her life authenticated the truth of her message.

Earlier this year on the final evening our church hosted the overflow shelter for the homeless during the winter months, something very special happened. That evening as we prepared to say goodbye to these guests, many whom our volunteers had gotten to know, members of our church offered to wash their feet. It was a holy moment as people in our congregation gently and carefully cleaned and towed off the weary and sometimes disfigured feet of our guests. I wish you could have seen the expression on their faces. That's what it means to reach out and touch someone in the name of Jesus, and in doing this, members of our church were following the example of our Lord. He reached out and touched an outsider.

II. The Healing of the Centurion's Servant.

"When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, asking for help. 'Lord,' he said, 'my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering.' Jesus said to him, 'I will go and heal him' (8:5-7).

The first-person Jesus healed was a leper, the classic outsider in Jewish society who was *completely* barred from participation in Israel's social and religious life. The second person we encounter in this passage is a centurion, a Gentile. He was a person who was *partially* barred from Israel's religious and social life. Lepers couldn't enter Jerusalem at all. Gentiles could, but they couldn't go any farther than the outermost Court of the Gentiles in the Temple area. And a Jew was forbidden to ever enter a Gentile's home.

In the brief appearance that this centurion makes on the stage of the NT, I think he is one of the most attractive figures in the gospel story. Centurions were the backbone of the Roman army. In a Roman legion, there were 6,000 soldiers, and the legion was divided into 60 centuries of 100 men each. And a centurion was in command of each century, hence the rank centurion. These centurions were the long-service, regular soldiers of the Roman army, and they were responsible for the discipline of the regiment and they held the army together. In peacetime and in war, the morale of the Roman army depended on them. It's interesting to note that every centurion that is mentioned in the NT is mentioned with honor.

But there was something very special about this centurion at Capernaum. His attitude toward his servant was unusual, especially for the time. A servant was no more than a slave, and the person was considered the property of his/her master. A slave had no legal rights whatsoever. And yet it is quite clear that this centurion had great affection for his servant.

In addition, he was an example of extraordinary faith. He knew that as a Jew Jesus wouldn't come into his home and heal the servant, so he asked Jesus to just say the word and the centurion believed it would be accomplished. He knew what it was like to give a command and have it carried out, and he was confident that Jesus could accomplish the healing just by ordering it to happen.

This is the first long-distance healing ever recorded in the gospels. But also notice that the servant is healed not by the servant's faith but on account of the faith of the centurion. It demonstrates that we can exercise faith on behalf of others in healing. Jesus never asked, "Does your servant believe in Me?" It was purely on the basis of the faith of the centurion that the servant was healed. This shows the power of intercession before God.

Jesus was impressed with the faith of the soldier, and He commended his example to the people around Him. And He told the centurion, "*Go! It will be done as you believed it would*" (8:13). And the servant was healed that very hour.

Whom do you need to pray for today? Who needs your intercessory prayer? For whom do you need to exercise faith this morning?

III. The Healing of Peter's Mother-in-law.

"When Jesus came into Peter's house, he saw Peter's mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on Him" (8:14,15).

If the leper is the first outsider, and the centurion the second, then Peter's mother-in-law could be considered the third. Jewish women were not allowed as far inside the Temple as Jewish men were. Lepers couldn't go into the Temple at all, and Gentiles could only go as far as the Court of the Gentiles. Then came, in order, the Court of the Women, and the Holy Place, where only Jewish men could go. And inside that was the Holy of Holies where only one Jewish male, the high priest, was allowed to go, and he only on one day of the year – the Day of Atonement.

You can see that women didn't have full access to religious worship in Judaism, and even in synagogues women were regularly placed behind screens at the rear, much like in modern Muslim mosques today. One of the 18 prayers a devout Jewish man would pray every day was a prayer of thanks that he had not been born a woman. This was the chauvinistic mindset that existed in Israel at the time of Christ. But in this healing Jesus broke down the wall of separation between the sexes.

I want you to notice Jesus's unsolicited mercy in healing this woman. No one asked Him to do it, and she didn't request the healing herself. Jesus takes the initiative, and there are absolutely no conditions that precede her healing.

According to the text, the woman was healed simply because Jesus wanted to heal her.

In some circles of Christianity today, believers are told that in order to be healed by God they have to exercise great faith, and if they aren't healed there must be a reason that is preventing their healing. But this passage contradicts that notion. I remember a woman who told me of an illness she had and how members of her church prayed for her healing and encouraged her to have great faith in God to heal her disease. I also remember her telling me of the shame she felt when she wasn't healed, and how she was made to feel that it was somehow her fault.

This trio of healings blows such ideas out of the water and reveals that notions like these are untrue. In this passage, we see a leper healed who exercises faith in Christ. But we also see a slave who is healed on the basis of the faith of someone else, and still another who exercises no faith at all. The diversity of these healings – the people, their settings and circumstances, and their level of faith – reveals the manifold grace of God which isn't dependent on our great faith but on God's great mercy, love and power.

This miracle for Peter's mother-in-law tells us something about Jesus. He healed this woman after a busy day of preaching and after He had already expended Himself in healing two other people. I suspect that when He got to Peter's house He was hoping for a break and to get some rest. But Jesus was never too tired to help someone in need. He didn't regard the demands of other people as a nuisance, and Jesus wasn't one of those people who is better in public than they are in private. In a crowd or in a cottage, Jesus was the same person. Can the same be said about you and me?

But this miracle also tells us something about the woman. No sooner had Jesus healed her than she began to attend to Christ's needs and the other guests who had come into her home. Even though she had been sick, God's restoring love prompted her to action and to service.

Do you use the gifts God has given you in this same way? Is your focus only on your own needs, or do you focus your attention on the needs of the people around you? How does God want you to serve later on today?

Conclusion.

In each of these healings Jesus broke down walls of separation. He was the Great Wallbreaker, and He wanted to include outsiders in His kingdom. One was physically excluded, one was racially excluded, and one was excluded because of her sex from the innermost worship of God. But these were the first people we're told about in the gospel of Matthew Jesus healed.

Who are the outsiders in our world today? Who are the people on the margins of our society, who are on the outside looking in? And what does God want us to

do to break down the walls and bring them into His kingdom? What can you do to be a welcoming influence for Christ?

My late wife Lorie had a heart for outsiders. It's one of the reasons I loved her so much. She was always concerned about people on the margins, and she took the initiative to reach out to them and bring them into the circle. Whether it was sitting in the balcony and keeping an eye out for people who weren't sure they belonged in church, or teaching an ESL Bible study at El Buen Pastor Church to immigrants, or helping start our church's Good Neighbor Team to resettle refugees in our community with World Relief, Lorie did what she could to make outsiders feel welcome and like they belong. I want to be more like her.

When you come right down to it, we're all outsiders looking in, regardless of how accepted we might feel in our social circles. When it comes to the righteousness of God and being included in His divine family, none of us deserves to be there. And all of us at one time were on the outside looking in because of our sin and brokenness. It's only because of Jesus and His death on the cross that we've been invited in and included in the family of faith.

Jesus was like my friend Flip Gallion who welcomed me in when I was in high school in the 9th grade. And Jesus has invited all of us in, He wants to introduce us to His Father and to the Holy Spirit, and He welcomes you and me into the family of faith. And it's because of Jesus' welcome that you and I can welcome others too. We can become agents of grace and reach out to the outsiders we encounter and invite them in as well.

So, look for an outsider this coming week, and break down the wall that separates people. You'll be following the example of Jesus when you do, and it might just bring some healing.

¹ E.W.G. Masterson, quoted by William Barclay in *Matthew*, Vol. 1, p. 295.

² Many of the insights in this sermon I owe to Dale's excellent commentary on the gospel of Matthew, and I've borrowed liberally from his research and writings.