

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Matthew 8:1-13
Sermon Title: "Desperate For Healing" (A Journey through Matthew)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA
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Two separate individuals healed in the span of 13 verses. Two miracles of grace. The one healed right in front of Jesus. The other healed some distance away from Jesus.

The leper's got a lot of guts approaching Jesus like he did. This guy was either really dumb for stepping in front of Jesus with the illness that he had, or he was really desperate. "Of all persons in Israel [lepers] were the most ostracized."¹ Nobody wanted them around. Lepers were considered unclean in the community and unclean before God, and it was thought that God had rejected them. They must have done something so terrible, so vile, as to receive a horrible skin condition, such a condition that was infectious if anybody else touched the person. The people were taught that lepers should keep their clothing and their hair dirty and messy. They should shout, "Unclean, unclean," before walking down the street, so that people can move to one side or hide

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 1, The Christbook, Matthew 1-12*, 299.

themselves completely. Lepers were such awful people, not allowed to go to church, not allowed to hang around the community, not allowed to do anything, let alone approach Jesus like our one leper does.

We can be awful people, too. We don't have leprosy covering our bodies, but it feels as though our sin covers every inch of our lives. We can do stupid things that sink us deeper in our sin. We can say such harmful and hateful things that embarrass us moments later. People walk away from us – they don't want us around. We don't like we what have become. Why do we do it, sin? How can we be so loving and then so unpleasant? We can really be awful, so much so that we find it hard to forgive ourselves. We wonder how anybody could forgive us. We soon believe that God cannot forgive us, ever.

Doctors and theologians have debated what this leprosy might have been. Usually when we hear "leprosy," we think of skin flaking off so that only muscles and bones are exposed. That's pretty disgusting, but that is not the only skin condition a person might have. People get skin conditions by using the wrong soaps or the wrong hand moisturizers. People have skin conditions from using

the wrong perfume or mascara. I once had Guttate Psoriasis, which are small to medium salmon-colored spots with white flakey skin in the middle. My whole body was covered with these spots, and it was somewhat unattractive. Some of the spots itched. Kids sitting at the desk next to me would wonder at what I had all over my arms, and I told them it was nothing. I put on medicate lotions and that reduced the itching. The skin doctor told me to visit a tanning booth, which he believed would kill the psoriasis. It did, and I had a great tan in the middle of February. Later in life an ear, nose, and throat specialist thought my Guttate Psoriasis was connected with my tonsils, so I had them removed. I haven't had another flakey spot on my body ever again.

I didn't have to roam the school hallways shouting, "Unclean!" I never had anybody repulsed at my presence, or suspect that I was an evil sinner. This one leper in Matthew 8 could have had Guttate Psoriasis, and people suspected him to be the worst of all sinners. Back then doctors only knew of one skin condition, not variations of them. There were no medicated ointments or tanning booths to cure the disease. The person had no friends, no acquaintances, no community. God seemed to be far away, because he could never worship God properly at the temple.

He must have been really stupid or really desperate to approach Jesus. He doesn't come up to Jesus saying, "Unclean." He comes to Jesus and worships him. When was the last time he worshipped God, was allowed to worship God? The leper says, "Make me clean, if you are willing." Take away my skin condition, Jesus, if you are willing not to ignore me, if you are willing not to run the other direction because a sinner is in your presence. Take away our "skin condition", Jesus, or rather our "sin condition," if you are willing to reveal God the Father to us, for God is always willing to reveal himself to us. Take away our sin condition, and let us know that we are more than our sin. We are children of God. God loves us. God cares for us. God is never far from us. Take away our "sin condition," Jesus, and with it our humiliation and our isolation from everybody and you.

Jesus put out his hand and touches him. Jesus touches the leper! When was the last time that person felt the touch of another human being? Nobody wanted to come near him, not even to see his face or look into his eyes. What a miracle it is that the first touch he receives in a long time comes not just from a human being but from God himself. When God heals us, he touches us in some way. We know God is near. We believe the word of God, because it touches us. We

believe God, because God's hand is on us.

The leprosy is gone. The sin is gone. The humiliation is gone. Jesus tells the former leper to see the priests to verify that the leprosy is no more. By doing this, the person receives a stamp of approval to enter back into the community. He may feel the human touch from everybody once more. Nobody will ever run from him again.

The centurion's got a lot of guts approaching Jesus like he did. He must have been either really clueless or really desperate. Listen to what the centurion admits to Jesus: "I also 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 slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it."² The centurion admits that he knows how to be in control. He knows how to accept responsibility, to make sure things get done, and does not rest until those things are finished. A centurion is a commander who oversees 100 men, and this centurion might be so good at his job that he might be a knight who holds the highest rank within a legend of soldiers. At the very least, we know this commander knows how to take control and stay in control. But there is one thing he cannot control:

² Matthew 8:9.

illness.

We want to be in control, and we are in control of certain things. There are certain things we plan for, make all the arrangements for, and see them to their completion. But we cannot plan for everything. We cannot make arrangements for every single thing, because sometimes situations get out of hand. They escape our control. We do our best to keep a stiff upper lip, put our noses to the grind stone. We think ourselves to be as tough as nails, a rugged individualist, grace under pressure; while inside we are freaking out. We are spinning out of control. We feel clueless, stupid, bleak.

The centurion in Matthew 8 has to admit his limitations. His servant is ill. Deathly ill. He must be a beloved servant, because this centurion is deeply worried about him. He cannot say to his servant, "Go" or "Do this," because the servant cannot move. He cannot say to the illness, "Go," because it will not obey. The centurion knows, however, that the illness will obey Jesus. Jesus can take care of his servant.

But the centurion must be really clueless, because no commanding officer admits weakness. A Roman centurion looks death in the face, but does not cower. And a Roman certainly does not approach a Jew for help. Are you kidding? The Jews do not help the

Romans – the Romans rule over the Jews, and subjugate them, bend them to the Roman will. Jesus might be able to heal his own people, but Romans stay clear of that stuff, unless Jesus starts disrupting the peace and unity of the Roman state. Then the troops are sent in. Otherwise, leave the Jewish teacher alone.

It takes a lot of gut to admit our limitations. It takes courage and character to realize that we are finite human beings with brains that can only understand so much, with hearts that can only beat so hard, with bodies that can only go so far. And then we need help. We need to reach the boundary of our limitations, and let God take it from there.

The centurion cannot see his favorite servant suffering. He cannot cure his servant on his own. He approaches Jesus. He admits to Jesus that he has so much power, but not as much as Jesus has. He knows that a Jew cannot, in no way, enter his Roman household, but he knows that Jesus may only say a word – just one small word, whisper that word if he likes – and the servant will be healed. Only Jesus may say “Go” or “Do this,” and it will be done.

If we read too quickly what Jesus says in verses 10-12, we might miss what Jesus is saying. If we get caught up in the weeping and gnashing of teeth part,

we will miss the invitation to the table. We will miss the fact that a centurion, who has little background on the Jewish faith, who has even less background than we do on who Jesus is, has the strength to believe that Jesus will heal his servant, even at a distance. We will miss the fact that a Jewish leper, who knows full well the Jewish law and how that law condemns him for his sin, has the strength to believe that Jesus will heal him, even touch him with hands of power.

Jesus invites people from the east and west to come to his table. It doesn't matter if you really know him or are just getting to know him, Jesus is inviting us as guests to the kingdom of heaven to find healing, to find wholeness. The great and the small may approach. By a word and by a touch healing comes. We sit at the table next to the centurion, his servant, and the former leper, and we all rejoice that God has done a miracle in our lives and restored us forever.