

Encounters with Jesus in Matthew
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
January 29, 2023 AM Sermon
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Matthew 8:5-13

Let's start at the end of this passage. Jesus makes reference to some sort of feast, some sort of banquet. It's a feast that takes place in the kingdom of heaven and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob will be there along with all the other patriarchs and matriarchs of faith. What banquet is this?

This is the great messianic end time banquet. In those days, people believed that when the Messiah came, there would be a great big party. There would be a feast. The Messiah would be there and all the righteous would recline at the table with him and there would be a banquet of celebration. If you read the religious writings of Jesus' day, there were lots of priests and religious leaders who wrote about this great banquet and how great it would be. And according to the scholar Kenneth Bailey, these writers had a pretty good idea who was going to be there, and who was not going to be there. Who was going to be there? "The wise, the intelligent and the perfect." The religious leaders. The Levites. The leaders of the nation (Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 90). Who wasn't going to be there? The unclean, the unfaithful, and certainly not Gentiles.

People like this centurion were certainly not expected to be part of the party. Let's take a closer look at the man to see why. Who was this centurion? He would have been a Gentile of either Roman or Syrian descent, so not someone a Jewish person would ever eat with. But he was also a centurion. A centurion was a high official in the Roman army who had command over a hundred soldiers. So he is a powerful guy, almost certainly one of the highest ranking Roman officials in town. And his responsibility was to use his power to make sure everyone in that town bowed the knee to Caesar. In effect he was commandant of an occupying army. How do you think that made the Jewish residents think about him? Do you think he was well-liked? Do you think they were eager to break bread with him? Do you think he was someone they hoped would be at the Banquet of the kingdom? Heavens no. Serious Jews would have despised this man. He was an oppressor. He was an agent of unjust power. When Messiah came, they were sure that the messiah would come against men like this, he would be brought down from his lofty place, humiliated and put to the sword. When they heard the prophet Zechariah say, 'On that day I will destroy all the nations that attack Jerusalem,' it was the destruction of men like this that they hoped for.

But now here comes Jesus and he puts this man, this enemy of Israel at the banquet of the righteous. Not only that. He gives him a seat right between Abraham and Isaac. He paints a picture of the three of them raising their glasses and laughing like they were old friends, laughing like they were brothers. Why? (we'll get to that in a moment)

It struck me this week that the Holy Spirit knew what he was doing when he put this story right after the Story of Jesus healing the leper. The Holy Spirit did something really compelling when he put these two people together and made them the first two people Jesus reaches out to in this part of Matthew. Both the leper and the centurion are unlikely candidates for the kingdom banquet, and they are unlikely in totally different ways. In the way people have divided themselves politically over the years, these men are kind of political opposites. Throughout history there have been political systems and movements on the side of the poor, advocating for the downtrodden. For those people, the problem in society is the rich and the powerful, people like this centurion. On the other end of the spectrum there have always been people who have favored the industry and creativity of the ruling class and celebrated the achievements of great men and women. For these people the problem is the dysfunction and dependency of the poor – people like this leper. Jesus' kingdom pays no attention to these political lines; his kingdom, his gospel reaches out to everyone. At the banquet of the kingdom his seating plan is Abraham, Isaac, Centurion, Leper, Jacob. There is no class warfare in this kingdom. Things don't divide neatly between downtrodden and elite, between oppressor and oppressed, between proletariat and the bourgeoisie. There is something more wonderful going on than can be contained in those tired old categories.

So the banquet brings together these two men from opposite ends of the spectrum, and seats them among Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, which gives us this beautiful, hopeful portrait of old divisions being overcome and

unlikely people united in the eternal feast. Does that mean everyone is welcome? Is Jesus teaching universalism? Is everyone coming to the banquet? No. There are people excluded. Some of the subjects of the Kingdom who thought they would be a part of the banquet find themselves on the outs, cast out into the darkness where there is weeping or gnashing of teeth.

Who are these subjects of the Kingdom? Well, in the context of the story Jesus is clearly referring to people who look like they're part of the flock, who think they are pious believers, but who don't actually know him. Jesus words here about subjects of the kingdom getting thrown outside into the darkness echoes the words he spoke in chapter 7:21 during the sermon on the mount. "Not everyone who says "Lord, Lord!" will enter the Kingdom of heaven." Jesus says there will be people who do miracles, and cast out demons and preach moving sermons and who show up in church every Sunday who will be on the wrong side of the Kingdom when the judgment comes. If the picture of the beggar and the centurion sitting together with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob makes us feel warm and fuzzy inside; this part of the story gives us a bit of a chill.

Why is the centurion in, while some of the pious church people are out? Jesus actually gives a pretty clear answer to that. It has something to do with faith. It is the faith Jesus sees in the centurion that makes him say "Many will come from the east and the west and the north and the south and take their places at the feast while some of the subjects of the kingdom will be on the outs." The people at the banquet are people of faith.

What does it mean to be a person of faith? What is Jesus celebrating when he says, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." We use the word faith about a lot of different things. In your pews we have the Our Faith books. These books contain statements about the things our church believes. The Apostles' Creed. The Heidelberg Catechism, the Contemporary Testimony; they're all in here and, as the title suggests, they summarize our faith. When a young person is working their way towards profession of faith, we use these documents to teach them. This is Our Faith we say.

Is that what Jesus means when he celebrates the faith of the centurion? No. He's not exclaiming over the man's doctrinal knowledge. Doctrinal knowledge is really important. We recently had a whole series dedicated to the Canons of Dort where we tried to grow your faith by revisiting these doctrines. But that's not what Jesus is celebrating in this man. This gentile centurion probably has little or no doctrinal knowledge.

Jesus celebrates a different part of faith. A deeper part. The most essential part. What moves Jesus about the man's faith is his trust. When Jesus talks about the man's faith he's clearly talking about the way the centurion puts himself completely into Jesus hands. Read carefully you see that the centurion surrenders his will, his power and his dignity.

He surrenders his will. Notice that when he approaches Jesus he doesn't even presume to tell Jesus what he should do. "Lord, my servant lies at home paralyzed." He doesn't assert his opinion. He doesn't say, "Jesus, please heal my servant." He just tells Jesus about the situation. He surrenders the situation to Jesus. Whatever Jesus chooses to do or not to do, that will be OK. 'Lord, your will be done.' He surrenders his will.

He also surrenders his power. Remember this man was certainly one of the most powerful men in Capernaum. He could say to one man 'go' and he would go. He said to another man 'come,' and he comes. But in Jesus' presence he surrenders his power and he becomes the servant, the subject. He says to Jesus, you say the word and I will accept it. In effect, the centurion who is used to holding his hand out in command, and having people bow their head before him, bows his head and opens his hand to receive whatever Jesus gives. This is not easy for a powerful man to do. If you do committee work, and many of you have, you can always tell when you are on a committee with someone who is used to being in charge and giving orders. I love having these decisive people on committees and heaven knows there are a lot of those people in this congregation, but it's hard for them to stop giving orders. It's hard for smart people to admit they're wrong. It's hard for rich people to let someone pay the bill. And it's hard for powerful people to put themselves under the command of another. But this man surrenders power.

He also surrenders his dignity. When the centurion surrenders himself to Jesus, people were watching. We know that because the text says that Jesus turned and talked to them. My guess is that there were a lot of people. Crowds were following Jesus. What are the optics of this moment for the centurion? Submitting himself to the poor Jewish Rabbi? How would that play for this powerful man? Would people in the crowd have

snickered? Maybe. Would the soldiers at the barracks talk about how unbecoming it was for a Roman soldier to demean himself like that? Probably.

And then there's this. The man gives up his will, gives up his power, his dignity and reputation, and who does he do it for? Himself? His child? A beloved member of the family? No, he does it for his servant. He does all this for the sake of his servant. That's remarkable, and it kind of makes me wonder if part of the reason Jesus reacts so strongly to this man's trust and surrender is that it reminds Jesus of his own earthly mission where he would surrender everything, give up his will, give up his life not for his own sake, but for the sake of us, his servants.

The knowledge part of faith is important and, in its own way critical, but the surrender is more central. Because in the surrender we are leaning towards him, opening our lives to him, letting him have Lordship.

I've done and seen a lot of professions of faith over the years, and occasionally a young person will say, "Why do I have to get up in front of everyone and do this! I know I'm a believer! I've learned all the things in church school. I got examined by the elders. Why do you guys make me stand up in front of all those people. It's embarrassing." Well, that's the surrender part. The surrender part is always a little vulnerable, a little scary, a little embarrassing. I've seen churches where the person making profession was required to kneel and bow their head as they made their profession. That embodies the surrender part. You're not up here to show that you've mastered your doctrine. You're up here to show that you have surrendered your life to Christ and if that feels scary, well, it is scary.

And it prepares you because this is only the beginning of a whole bunch of other surrenders that you are going to have to make that are part of following Jesus along the way. Someday you will find yourself in a situation where you've been hurt by someone, given a wound that you didn't deserve. And you want to go up and pop that person. You want to scream at them. You fantasize about some sort of payback. But instead you surrender to Jesus. You forgive. You still confront the person, but you do it in a spirit of peace, and patience and self-control. You give up your need for revenge. And Jesus gives you the strength to keep going. Or maybe you'll find yourself as a young adult in a big city and you're finding that all your acquaintances at work and all the people around you who are your age are into the hook-up culture. The sex is completely casual. 'It's no big deal,' they say. But you surrender to Jesus. You patiently wait and try to match your sexual expression to your level of commitment, like Jesus taught you, even though your friends shake their heads at you and call you crazy. "Dude, are you training for the priesthood or something?" And Jesus gives you the strength to keep going.

Or maybe you will just be at the end of your rope. You've been trying to make headway in the storm for so long and you are worn out. You are done. And you think about just walking away from it all. Give up the fight and live for yourself. But you don't. You surrender to Jesus. You keep pressing forward. You keep giving and loving and serving. And Jesus gives you the daily manna. Just enough strength to get through.

That's what it feels like to follow Jesus. That surrender move is the center of our discipleship. Again this morning, Jesus is here among us. He has prepared a table for us, a foretaste of the feast of the Kingdom. Here is the food of a new life, a new creation. It's a good time to renew your faith, to practice that surrender move. So come to this table in faith. Lift up your hearts, surrender your Spirit, give yourself to Jesus, and let him fill you.

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