

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, January 28, 2007

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One enemy of genuine faith is a sense of entitlement—the belief that I have some special standing before God because of who I am or what I have done. A sense of entitlement can develop from personal attributes. If one is smarter, better looking or more talented than most so that one receives great recognition from the world, there will be the temptation to think that these attributes also put one in slightly better standing with God.

A sense of entitlement can develop from family background. A proud family may feel it stands just a little above the rest. I remember a song from an old musical called, *1776*. A member of the Lee family was speaking, I believe, to John Adams. He sang, “I do believe that God is everybody’s God, but I tell you John, with pride, that He leans a little to the side of the Lees of old Virginia.”

A sense of entitlement can develop from the practice of religion. If I’ve been an Anglican for several decades so that I know all the details of the faith—when to bow, when to kneel, when to make the sign of the cross and so forth—there may be the slightest tendency to think I am just a little more “in” with God than the person who walks through the door for the first time.

This was a problem with Israel. The nation was looking for the Messiah to come. But the leadership had a certain sense of entitlement. The Pharisees, for example, thought that because they had great zeal for the Torah and the tradition, the Messiah would count them as righteous people when he came. Consequently, when John the Baptist said that each and every Jewish person, from small to great, had to repent and be baptized to enter the kingdom, not many Pharisees came.

Today’s gospel tells of two people who came to Jesus to ask for healing. One was a leper and the other a Roman soldier. Neither had any standing within the covenant God made with Israel. The leper was deemed to be unclean by the Law of Moses. He was unable to be a part of society and lived in isolation with his fellow lepers.

The centurion was, most likely, a “God-fearer.” This term referred to a Gentile who attended the synagogue but was not yet circumcised. A parallel account of the same story in Luke tells us that this centurion had contributed generously to the building of the synagogue in Capernaum. Still, he was a Gentile and a pious Jew would not even go into his home. A Gentile was viewed as a “dog”—even if he was a nice dog like this centurion.

The leper fell prostrate before Jesus in the most humble of ways. The centurion said, “Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof.” Because the leper and the Gentile understood that they had no claim on God, their approach to Jesus was rooted in faith, which is trust in God and dependence upon God. The fewer merits a petitioner thinks he has, the more he must depend upon the mercy of the giver. This is what God wants. As Psalm 147 says,

He hath no pleasure in the strength of an horse, neither delighteth he in [the strength of] any man’s legs. But the Lord’s delight is in them that fear him, and put their trust in his mercy (147:10-11).

In our study of Proverbs, we have discussed the “fear” of God. When we see God as he is, in his holiness, majesty, beauty, eternity and power, we come to see who we are by contrast: sinful, mortal and weak. Fear is the natural response to this encounter with God. We see it in Isaiah 6, where Isaiah saw God on his throne. We see it in St. Peter, when he recognized Jesus in the miraculous catch. We see it in St. John in Revelation 1, when he saw the ascended and glorified Jesus.

But this fear of God is not abject terror, for God is love; which means that his holiness, majesty and power are exercised for our good. Faith begins with fear, but grows into trust. Faith believes that God can and will act for our good. Faith develops a new kind of confidence; not a confidence in our supposed merit, but a confidence in God, which comes from knowing and trusting him.

Jesus said of the centurion, “I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.” His faith included humility and confidence in God. It seems that Jesus meant to praise both of these qualities. Jesus wants us to know who we are in relationship to God, to have humility. But Jesus also wants us to be confident in the mercy and goodness of God, to pray as those who expect that God can and will act for our good.

It was the non-entitled status of the leper and the centurion that led them to genuine faith. Likewise, our most fervent and fruitful times of prayer often occur when our sense of status and security in the world are shaken. For then we look to God with greater humility, which leads to greater trust, and we experience more of the presence and power of God in our lives as a result.

St. Paul had been given special visions and revelations that might have made him proud and full of himself. Consequently, God gave him a “thorn in the flesh,” a physical affliction to humble him. In response to his prayers for healing, God said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

In this light, we should understand that the things which give us humility and a sense of our human weakness are the very things that make us turn to God and trust him. Many things we ask to be freed from are actually the means of great grace in our lives.

We can hear echoes of the centurion’s humility and confidence in our liturgy: “We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table *but* Thou are the same Lord whose property is to have mercy.”

Based on our confidence in God’s love and mercy, we ask for—and receive—great things: The forgiveness of our sins, union with Christ and all the saints, and a place in the coming kingdom. When we understand that God doesn’t owe us anything, but put our trust in his love and mercy, we discover that we receive everything from him.