

And behold, a leper came to Him and knelt before Him, saying, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." And He stretched out His hand and touched Him, saying, "I will; be clean." [Matthew 8.2-3; RSV]

I.

In our text for this 3rd Sunday after the Epiphany, St. Matthew presents two encounters between Christ and men who have come to know what they believe to be the will of God for them. They don't ask. They announce. These two quite diverse men both have come to conclusions about God's will for their lives, and they announce this conclusion." The leper announces, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." And the Roman army officer, a Centurion, announces, as Jesus has just said that he would accompany the man to his house to heal his servant: "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I 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 he does it."

Now, the leper does not claim to know God's will in this case. He only knows what he announces, as a certainly. "Lord, if You will, you can make me clean." And the centurion does not question Christ's ability to heal. He does not question Christ's desire to heal. He does not question Christ's authority to heal. No, in fact he banks on all these things. He, a Gentile, a pagan, has been taught the faith concerning the person and the work of Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit has given him faith to affirm and accept this, the Christian faith, as true. Now, as with the leper before him, only knows what he announces, as a certainly. "Only say the word, and my servant will be healed."

In both cases, faith is at work. You hear this faith in the announcements that these two men make. They have come to have faith in Christ as their Savior and their God. They do NOT know the specific will of Christ for their particular issue. But they do know the character of God seen in the person of Jesus the Christ.

To live by faith is to believe, to trust what God has revealed in Christ, and what has been taught by the Church concerning this revelation of God, the teachings we call the doctrine of the Christian faith. Trusting what Christ teaches leads one to live in that faith, to trust the truthfulness and the rightfulness of God's revealed Word: "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." "Only say the word, and my servant will be healed." That is simply affirming what God's authority teaches to be true, and thus it is simply living by that truth.

II.

What you hear from the leper and from the centurion, is the voice of the new man that God has created within each of them. To live in faith involves speaking the only thing that the new man says in this life, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner"; "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof." "Lord, if you will." Faith that lives within you does not hide, nor ignore,

nor deny, nor minimize, the fact that I am a sinner, through and through. Faith that lives in you does not say, "Well, of course it's true that I am a sinner, but can't we just go on to talk about something else?" The answer to that question is a resounding, "NO!" "No, we can't talk about something else, unless you wish no longer to live in faith." To live in faith is to live in the forgiveness of sins, and you cannot live in the forgiveness of sins as a present-moment, on-going reality unless you confess that you are a poor, miserable sinner as your present-moment identity. Only then, only in the truth of being a poor, sinful being, does the Gospel bring you the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. Only then can you be living in faith.

Without this confession of utter sinfulness, you can only live by calculation. With this confession of utter sinfulness, calculation, pride, pretense, and common sense all go out the window. There is nothing left to bank on but the mercy of God. "Lord, if

you will, you can make me well.” And then God has you where He wants you, namely, in the place to receive, rejoice in, and trust the forgiveness of sins and the relationship of peace and reconciliation between you and God that the forgiveness of sins brings. God then has you where you can live in faith.

III.

What is it that Christ is pointing to when He declares the centurion’s faith to be “great”? Jesus shows you in today’s text that “Great faith” is simply living in faith, living on the basis that everything God promises and declares is the truth. In other words, “great faith” is the only faith that God intends you to exercise in daily life.

Therefore, when Jesus says, “I only find great faith here, in this foreigner,” He is not praising centurion, He is condemning Israel. Therefore, “little faith” is not an average-guy role in the church. Jesus uses that term to shame and chastise His disciples, as He shames and chastises Israel in today’s Holy

Gospel.

When God calls you into His kingdom, adopting you as His child in holy baptism, He gives you faith. Without that call, without the gift of faith, without the continuing ministry of the Holy Spirit to keep you in the faith, you would have no faith at all. The only faith that God calls you to, and gives to you, and sustains and nurtures in you, is great faith. It is great faith, or no faith at all. “Little faith” is simply the word of judgment on those who will not trust what God declares to be true.

Living in faith is the great venture to which you have been called as God’s child. It is the venture of living in the forgiveness of sins. It is the venture of living in the pure love and mercy of God who will never, never, never fail you.

Though fallen state of this earthly existence will always bring pain and struggle and the temptation to doubt, your dear Lord will be in every challenge, keeping you in the faith that He creates and sustains in you.