

## They are Worthy

A Reflection for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC

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Text: Luke 7:1-10

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. <sup>2</sup>A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. <sup>3</sup>When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. <sup>4</sup>When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, <sup>5</sup>for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." <sup>6</sup>And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; <sup>7</sup>therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. <sup>8</sup>For I also am a man set 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." <sup>9</sup>When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." <sup>10</sup>When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

Reflection

They are worthy.

They are worthy. Though we might not expect it, the synagogue leaders say: the centurion is worthy. The servant is worthy, though we might not expect the centurion to think so. The people are worthy, in the centurion's eyes - he has built their synagogue. The centurion sees that Jesus is worthy, too.

The centurion does not feel he is worthy - he approaches Jesus with humility, concerned for his servant, concerned for the community, concerned also for Jesus.

But Jesus treats the servant and the centurion as worthy.

They are all worthy of care. They are all worthy of dignity. They are all worthy of respect. They are all worthy of compassion. They are all worthy. Every one of them is worthy.

You see I got caught up with the word worthy this week.

So often we divide each other up into those who are worthy or unworthy, more worthy or less worthy. *They* aren't worthy of my time, your energy, our resources. But this is not the way God sees human beings nor the way God wants us to see each other.

In the words of Desmond Tutu, "God's dream is that you and I and all of us will realize that we are family, that we are made for togetherness, for goodness, and for compassion."

This is a lesson of dignity and grace and worth.

In Bible study this week, someone offered us this lovely quote: "God sees what others overlook, and God overlooks what others see." Which is to say, God sees in every person someone who is worthy and deserving of compassion, and that is the way Jesus teaches us to see one another.

Which brings us back to the passage we've been talking about throughout the season of Lent, helping us to understand creation care and climate justice through a Christian lens. Remember Matthew 25's word on tending to the most vulnerable people as if we are tending to Jesus. Everyone is worthy of care. Jesus challenges us with words like these: when I was sick, you took care of me.

We know how to do this with individuals. We bring soup, we drive folks to chemo, we pray for and envision wellness.

In this season we're looking beyond individuals to systems. And today we ask, what makes communities sick, and how do we treat whole communities as worthy?

If every one of God's beloved children is worthy of love, compassion, and wellness, then no individual or community should be treated as disposable or unimportant.

And yet there are whole communities, neighborhoods, regions devastated by environmental harm. We know that globally and in the long term, climate change is devastating. But we also know that there are specific places in our country where whole communities' health and welfare is endangered by power and chemical plant pollution. "Cancer alleys," leaded water, and playgrounds with heavy metals in the soils.

They're called 'sacrifice zones' by environmental activists, and here's a quote: "The justification is always an economic one, that it makes sense to build chemical plants on so-called cheap lands where poor people and people of color live, but which are only cheap because all the wealth and economic opportunities have been stripped out. The people who live in these areas are unseen, unheard and undervalued." - Mustafa Ali, formerly of the EPA.<sup>1</sup>

But here's the thing. We are people of faith *who believe in a God who is worthy to be praised* (Psalm 18:3), and we are people of faith who follow a Teacher who says *every single person is worthy*. So we do not count anyone or any community as disposable. And when we make commitments to take care of creation, to reduce carbon emissions and lower toxic pollution - when we do this through individual actions and through the ways that we engage as voters - we do so not only for our own children and grandchildren - we do so for all children.

We do so, from a place of love, and a place of deliberate and chosen and active hope, because, "Hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up." (David Orr)

And we work for creation care, climate justice and the renewal of the earth because there is reason to believe we can make a difference, right now, and the work we do right

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<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/oct/21/what-is-environmental-injustice-and-why-is-the-guardian-covering-it> and  
[https://www.sneucc.org/files/sneucc/general+documents/environmental+justice+bible+study\\_1.pdf](https://www.sneucc.org/files/sneucc/general+documents/environmental+justice+bible+study_1.pdf)  
and  
<https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/faithful-action-ministries/environmental-justice/breathtothepeople/>

now has positive impacts on our health and the health of our neighbors. To quote the Climate Optimist newsletter which Fran Ludwig forwarded me this week: “Technology is evolving quickly, costs are falling fast, renewable energy is growing exponentially, policies are taking hold, activism is thriving, public opinion is shifting, and the health benefits of climate action are clear.”<sup>2</sup>

And so, people who are worthy, in the words of Ephesians, let us lead a life worthy of the calling to which we are called. Amen.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. - Philippians 4:8

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/c-change/climateoptimist/>