

Epiphany IV

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[0 : 00] One of the most important aspects of our faith is the belief that the Lord shows no partiality, that is, no favoritism.

In other words, the Lord does not show favoritism to the healthy, wealthy, and wise. This truth is magnified in Peter's great sermon in Acts chapter 10.

But we also read about our Lord's desire for communion with all people in texts like Romans chapter 2, or Ephesians chapter 6, or James chapter 2, just to name a few biblical references.

The Bible makes it clear that God desires all people to be cleansed from sin and to join his eternal family.

He does not look at Americans as superior to Arabs or Asians or Africans. In our Lord's eyes, we are all made in his image so that we might have communion with him for all eternity.

[1 : 18] And that's why Jesus came to this earth. He came to seek and save out, save all who are lost, all who are alienated from God because of sin.

Our gospel text speaks very candidly to this fact that God shows no partiality. Jesus heals two very different types of people here in Matthew chapter 8.

The first is a leper. Now, what is a leper? A leper is one who had a skin disease that could eventually cause lesions or even numbness in the limbs of the body.

In the ancient world, it was thought to be highly contagious, although now we know it's only spread through saliva. In ancient Israel, such a person would be put into a colony with other lepers, and they would all be considered unclean.

And such a person would be ostracized and even shunned by the people of Israel. And the shunning was not only because they were lepers, not only because they had this awful disease, but the assumption was that this debilitating ailment was most likely a curse or some kind of judgment from God.

[2 : 55] They had done something to make God mad. Here in Matthew chapter 8, a certain leper now pleaded with Jesus to heal him.

And Jesus not only listens to this man, he not only honors this request, he does the unthinkable. He reaches out to this unclean leper and he touches the man.

Now, this might not seem like a big deal, but it is huge. Because Jesus is now considered unclean according to the ceremonial Jewish law.

Jesus takes this man's uncleanliness upon himself. By touching this man, he makes the man clean, but he becomes unclean.

In the words of St. Paul in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 21, For he made him who knew no sin, that is Jesus, to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him, that is in Christ.

[4 : 14] Jesus touches this man, he heals this man. He shows compassion on this man. In similar fashion, our Lord comes to us, giving us his very own body and blood, so that we might be cleansed, that we might receive the full remission, and the full forgiveness of our sins.

There is no partiality with God. Because this new life and this new communion with God is offered to the whole world through Jesus the Christ.

Now, a leper is one thing, but the next person our Lord encounters is quite different. When Jesus entered into Capernaum, he heard the pleading of a centurion.

Now, a centurion was a Roman soldier, really a general in the Roman army, who had at least a hundred soldiers under his command. Very important figure.

A centurion was a feared man, not a shunned man like the leper. He wasn't an outcast like the leper. And this powerful Roman centurion pleads with our Lord to heal his servant.

[5 : 42] When our Lord volunteers to go with the centurion to his house, this important Roman commander says what we echo before we receive the body and blood of Christ in the Holy Eucharist.

He says, Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof, but speak the word only, and my, we say, soul, he says, my servant shall be healed.

Jesus responds to this centurion's faith by saying here in verses 10 and 11 of Matthew chapter 8, assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel.

And I say to you that many will come from east and from west and will sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Unlike the leper who received the touch of God, our God who has come in human flesh, the servant of the centurion was healed by the very word of God.

[6 : 59] Jesus did not even go and approach the servant, but his word healed this man. What our Lord is saying and what he does aligns with the season, with the message of epiphany.

Epiphany is all about the manifestation and revelation of God to the Gentiles. Many in Israel forfeited their right to become children of God because they had become a clannish and sectarian people who looked down upon others.

Their religion was often ethnocentric rather than Christ-centered. These people, who were considered unclean, represented by the leper, and complete heathen Gentiles, represented by the centurion, would now sit down in the kingdom of heaven with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

These outcasts and strangers to God would now be welcomed as sons of God and partakers of his covenant and his grace.

God does not show partiality or favoritism. He is not the God of the most fit or the most attractive or the richest.

[8 : 24] He is the God of all who humble themselves before him in faith. The warning to all of us is the same as it was to ancient Israel.

We are called to be people of mercy, of compassion, reflecting the very nature and heart of our God. We are called to protect the vulnerable and resist the prideful.

We are to humble ourselves before our God who came to this earth in complete lowliness. Our God took our flesh upon himself so that he might serve, that he might give his life as an offering, his very own body and blood to the world.

And our Lord did this because he is not the capricious deity who cares only for the mighty and the strong. He is the loving God who comes to the lowly, who comes to the meek in order to offer his mercy and his grace.

Friends, you might feel inadequate. You might feel unloved. But the Lord loves you as much as he loves the most popular of the saints.

[9 : 58] And that's why he offers you his healing. That's why he offers you his touch this morning. Jesus is the word of God that has come in human flesh and blood to give you a front row seat.

a front row seat as his honored guest in his kingdom at his table where there is life, love, and mercy for you and for the whole world.

Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.