

## “Safe-Keeping: Communal/Economic Health”

### Matthew 8: 5-13

When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him <sup>6</sup> and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.” <sup>7</sup> And he said to him, “I will come and cure him.” <sup>8</sup> The centurion answered, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. <sup>9</sup> For I also 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 the slave does it.” <sup>10</sup> When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, “Truly I tell you, in no one<sup>[a]</sup> in Israel have I found such faith. <sup>11</sup> I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, <sup>12</sup> while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” <sup>13</sup> And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.” And the servant was healed in that hour.

The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

We continue this week in the Gospel of Matthew, taking a look at another healing narrative. This time in our narrative, we never meet the person who is healed. We only know that he is a servant which means that in ancient Mediterranean society, he is the ultimate nobody.

We only know about this servant’s need for healing because someone brings that need forward to the wider community, because someone notices the need and decides to do something about it. We only know about this servant’s need for healing because someone seeks out Jesus and tells Jesus about it.

That someone is also considered to be an outsider. He is a centurion, a soldier in the Roman army. He is a part of the oppressive system defined as Empire.

Yet all that falls away in the face of the need for healing. All that falls away as we hear the plea of one man seeking healing for someone else who depends on him. All that falls away in face of relationship and connection, not just as individuals but as community.

Again, this week, Matthew is inviting his readers to reimagine the Kingdom of God, to realize that “Jesus has the power to re-vision the family of God in which false boundaries are overcome. Again, this week, Matthew is reminding us that in all his teachings, in all his interactions with people, Jesus never does what we expect him to do.

We assume that because both men are outsiders, that because one man is part of the Empire and the other is a nobody, we assume that Jesus will ignore the request for healing. After all, Jesus has said on multiple occasions in the Gospel of Matthew that he is here for the house of Israel first.

Yet, Matthew shows us that Jesus transforms our expectations that instead, Jesus brings salvation to everyone, not just those who think like us, who act like us, who look like us.

By healing this servant, by praising the centurion's faith, Jesus shows his disciples that in the Kingdom of God, no one is left out. No one is ignored. No one is forgotten.

This statement would have been hard to hear for some of Matthew's original audience. This statement is still hard to hear for some who profess to be Christians, especially those who want to create boundaries around the Church. Yet time and time again, Jesus shows us, tells us as his disciples that the Kingdom of God does not play by our rules, that it does not ask our permission before it brings healing and wholeness to all. Time and time again, Jesus shows us, tells us as his disciples that the Kingdom of God does not seek our approval on who is in and who is out.

The beauty of this story is that it gives us a glimpse into what the Kingdom of God will look like here on Earth when its promise is fulfilled. It is a vision in which "all people come together to enjoy one another and feast at the table of God. God gathers us all." God welcome all to God's Table. God names and claims all as Beloved Children of God. "God longs for us to be together and for us to all be safe and whole. And God gives us, as the people of God, agency to help bring this vision to fruition.

Or let me say it this way...As we all know and have said before 2020 was a difficult year. From the pandemic to the sense of loss which is still lingering,

everything has shifted and changed. This shift in narrative hit close to home for this community of faith last year when we learned that our history may not be what we thought it to be.

In July last year, it was brought the attention of the leadership of this congregation about a connection between the destruction of Midway's Freedmen's School in 1867 and our community of faith.

This was history which I was not aware of as the minister of Midway Christian Church. In all our conversations about our history as a congregation, from the organ incident which led to the split between the Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to founding of the Kentucky Female Orphan School, in all our conversations about our history as the community of Midway, I had never heard about the Midway's Freedmen's School nor had I heard about Midway Christian Church's connection to the destruction of it.

Here is what was shared with me: This is an excerpt from Dr. Botkin's book, "The Story of Midway University"

"In April of [1867], the Midway black church opened a school sponsored by the Freedmen's Bureau, operating in the log meetinghouse on the lower edge of the property owned by KFOS./ (Kentucky Female Orphan School)

With 46 pupils initially enrolled, the school had one teacher. Most of the students were children, but a handful were over sixteen. \*

The school operated for a year without incident, but for whatever reason, in April 1868, the KFOS trustees appointed a committee to notify "the Negroes" to close the school they were running on KFOS property. The church leaders must have requested more time for on July 8 the trustees instructed the committee to demand that at the end of the present session the congregation must close the school.

The board of trustees consisted of Christian Church ministers and prominent laymen, the majority of whom held membership in Midway Christian Church. Did their demands grow out of concerns about potential violence on their property or from their own racism? Perhaps it was some of both. Tragically, the committee did not have to carry out the order.

On July 31 in the dead of night, a mob shot out windows and wrecked the meetinghouse, wounding a few people in the melee.\*\*

Not surprisingly, the Kentucky Superintendent's August report lists the Midway "colored" school as closed. R. E. Johnston, the Woodford County agent for the Freedmen's Bureau, arrested and prepared to try some of the mob, but the county attorney refused to prosecute. Johnston, acting as an agent of the federal government, then proceeded to conduct a trial himself. Because of the darkness when the attack occurred and conflicting testimony, he had no choice but to dismiss all charges. \*\*\*

The trustees' minutes of August 12 do not acknowledge the scandalous calamity, nor do they demonstrate any signs of regret or sympathy. To the contrary, they determined to keep their special ad hoc committee intact to ensure compliance on the part of the former slave congregation.

The first time this information was shared with me, it felt like I had been sucker punched in the gut. This information shattered the idealized image I had of a community of faith which recognized and cared for the poor, which prided itself on being innovative in conversations about faith and relationship. This information

shattered my idolized image of a community of faith which tries to live out its mission of Welcome in all things and through all things.

The brokenness which is a result of this destruction still sits in our community. In fact, it continues to call me out as the minister of this community of faith every time I talk about reconciliation for being a hypocrite for not dealing with our own past of hatred and racism. The brokenness which is a result of this destruction holds me accountable every time I look upon my bi-racial daughter's face.

Because it reminds me that wholeness cannot happen for the Body of Christ as long as one part is hurting, as long as one part is ignored or forgotten. Healing cannot happen for the Body of Christ until we proceed into the brokenness and invite something beautiful to come forth from all the pain and sorrow.

I don't know what our year as a community of faith holds for us in the months ahead but I do know that as Midway Christian Church, as people of faith, as ones who history includes this destruction of community, we cannot talk about having a season of recovery until we name this hurt, until we own this hurt, until we break down the false boundaries which continue to push people away. It is my hope and my prayer that by knowing of this brokenness, we will renew our commitment for community connection and relationships, that we will start the

process of healing by having the courage and the strength to have some uncomfortable conversations about who we were in the past, who we are now, and how this holds us accountable to who we want to be in the future as a community of faith. It is my hope and my prayer that we hold on to the vision of the Kingdom of God coming to fruition here on Earth, where all are welcome, where all are embraced and seen as beloved children of God, where all are invited to come to the table, not to be assimilated but to be welcomed as one created in the image of God. It is my hope and my prayer that in this season of recovery we, as Midway Christian Church invite this vision of the Kingdom of God to be our guide , reimagining the status quo as the Spirit of God continues to bring forth beauty from that which is seemingly broken. May it be so. Amen.