

Sermon for Grace and Holy Trinity Church, Richmond, VA  
Lent 2, Year A, March 8, 2020  
The Rev. Bill Queen, "We Are Worthy"  
Psalm 121, Romans 4:1-5, John 3:1-17

God, in these days of lenten journey, may we see and hear your call to sow justice in the lives of those we serve. [Song: "In these days of lenten journey"]

over all of my years of ordained ministry, one of the most consistent and troubling conversations I've repeatedly had with parishioners is one about people not feeling worthy in their relationship with God; I've known people who have lived with that baggage of feeling unworthy all of their lives, and usually it was the church that made them feel that way

and especially during this season of Lent when our prayers and Bible readings focus on penitence, on the recognition of us having done wrong and fallen short of God's desires for us, it is important to ask ourselves: do we see ourselves as worthy in our relationship to God? do we see ourselves as worthy of the gifts that God has freely chosen, out of love, to give us? do we see ourselves as worthy of Baptism, worthy of Holy Communion, and worthy of salvation?

our Psalm today reminds us that God watches over us; but God doesn't do that in a Santa Claus-like record-keeping of what we've done that's naughty, vs. what we've done that's nice; God watches over us to be our helper and protector

our Romans reading today reminds us that God's promises rest on grace; and what is grace? grace is defined in the Catechism (*BCP* p. 858) as "God's favor toward us, unearned and undeserved;" there is no mention of us having to be worthy of grace; we all have our ups and downs, times when we've let others down, when we've let ourselves down, and when we've let God down; but we are never unworthy; we are all, always, worthy of Jesus' love and grace

our reading from the gospel today includes one of the best loved and most quoted passages from the entire Bible, John 3:16, where Jesus says: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in

him may not perish but may have eternal life;" that is God's plan of grace and salvation; and again, no mention of us having to be worthy of it

one other passage where the Bible addresses this directly is in the story of Jesus' exchange with the Canaanite or Syrophenecian woman, both descriptions indicating that she is a gentile, not Jewish (Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30); she asks Jesus to heal her daughter; Jesus says to her in very harsh words, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," meaning to take things appropriate for Jews and share them with non-Jews; I can't justify that remark of Jesus', and I've never heard a convincing argument that explains why he would say that—it is far out of character for him

but she is a woman who will not easily be refused; she replies to him, "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table;" and by that remark she demonstrates a faith and a powerful sense of self-worth that goes beyond the boundaries of gender, race, tribe, or nationality; Jesus ends up by healing her daughter; she knew that she and her daughter were worthy of Jesus' attention and healing grace; Jesus demonstrated, finally, that he recognized them as worthy too; in a way she was also challenging Jesus to put up or shut up; is the faith he's preaching limited only to Jews? no, it wasn't; we know this from other passages too; Jesus had a lengthy theological exchange with a Samaritan woman at a well (John 4:4-26); he sent his disciples out to Samaritan cities (Luke 9:52); he heals a Roman Centurion's servant (Matthew 8:5-13), even when that Centurion himself says "I am not worthy to have you come under my roof;" but yes, he was worthy!

unfortunately, we have places in our *Book of Common Prayer* that reinforce the idea of unworthiness; Holy Eucharist Rite I has the optional Prayer of Humble Access, which we do not use: "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under Thy table" (p 337); notice that the prayer book is using the same wording from the story of the Canaanite woman to suggest that we are ... less worthy than dogs! that statement flies in the face of the Good News expressed throughout the Bible; the truth is, referring to receiving Holy Eucharist, that we are worthy of a lot more than crumbs—we are worthy of the very Body and Blood of Christ; that same misleading theology is also found in the Rite I Eucharistic Prayer I: "we are unworthy, through our manifold sins, to offer unto thee any sacrifice" (p 336); so we use the optional Eucharistic Prayer II; it is still in Rite I traditional language, but it does not include any theology that suggests unworthiness; we also find this theology in

Morning Prayers' General Thanksgiving: "we your unworthy servants" (p 101); so we use instead the alternative Prayer of St Chrysostom; in every place in our *Book of Common Prayer* liturgies where the question of worthiness is compromised, the option is always given so they either don't have to be said at all, or an alternative is provided that does not convey unworthiness; this was an explicit decisions on the part of our prayer book theologians

the only reason we have such non-Biblical statements in our liturgy, is that we have inherited pieces of our liturgy from long, long ago; some words from the very first Book of Common Prayer of 1549 are still there today; they are more a reflection of the predominant Roman Catholic Church's theology of that time, which was still a very highly penitential Medieval theology; that is not our faith as Episcopalians

what we find more prevalent in our liturgies now, thankfully, are clear statements about our worthiness; Rite II Eucharistic Prayer B (p 368) says : "you [Jesus] have made us worthy to stand before you;" and Eucharistic Prayer C, that we used on Ash Wednesday and at 11:00 Holy Communion services during Lent, does not give the option for people to "stand or kneel;" you are invited to stand as you participate fully in the Eucharistic Prayer in dialogue form with the priest, becoming co-celebrants, showing that priest and people are equally worthy, gathered around the Holy Table together; the words of Eucharistic Prayer C continue to reiterate our worthiness; we have been "reconciled" and "healed;" we have been "made a new people;" we are "the People of God;" we are worthy because Christ has made us worthy

as Episcopalians, our beliefs are not written out in books of doctrine; we pray, in our prayer book liturgies, what we believe; and the way we worship is our most powerful reminder of how we are supposed to relate to God, how we are supposed to relate to other people, how we are supposed to relate to God's creation, and how we are supposed to relate to our true selves

in our words of worship together we will continue to be reminded that we are meant to approach God in a sense of worthiness; our proper relationship to God, to Christ, and to the Holy Spirit is a praise-filled and loving response to the overwhelming eternal love that God has for us, because—thanks be to Jesus—we are worthy