

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Penguins In An Art Museum

Dr. Scott Dudley

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Scripture: Matthew 8:5-13

⁵ When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. ⁶ "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly." ⁷ Jesus said to him, "Shall I come and heal him?" ⁸ The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹ For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." ¹⁰ When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. ¹¹ I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. ¹² But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." ¹³ Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that moment.

Transcript:

Well, thank you, worship team. It's great to have you with us. I want to say welcome to those of you who are here. My name is Scott Dudley, I'm the senior pastor. We are glad that you are joining us for worship. It was Veteran's Day this week, so I also want to say thank you to the veterans. Thank you for your service. Thank you for all that you've done for our country, including my brother, I want to say thank you.

So thank you for joining us. It's great to have you. The scripture reading today comes from Matthew, chapter eight. When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him asking for help. "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly." Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him." The centurion replied, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but just say the word and my servant will be healed. For I am myself a man under authority with soldiers under me. I tell this one go, and he goes, and that one come, and he comes. And I say to my servant, "Do this," and he does it."

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go, let it be done just as you believed it would. And his servant was healed at that moment." So Holy Spirit, use these next few minutes, what I'm going to say, what folks are going to think, to help us be more like you, and get closer to you. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Well, someone sent me this awhile back. How many optometrists does it take to change a light bulb? One or two? One or two? So, in the first hour there were some folks here that didn't get that, so I hope you get it. You know, they put the thing on you when they test your eyes, right? It's a dad joke, I know, but I'm a dad. So I tell dad jokes. And usually when I'm at the optometrist, they put that thing, it's like one or two, and I'm like, "I don't know. They're both blurry. Is there an option three or four?"

Life is like that. I think we often get choices, neither of which we like. And it feels like sometimes you have only two options. If someone hurts me, I know that Jesus says to turn the other cheek, but are my only two options either to fight back or be a doormat? Is that it, one or two? Is that it? Isn't there a third? Or if there's someone I know who's engaged in sinful and destructive behavior, on the one hand I don't want to be judgmental. On the other hand, it doesn't seem right to just ignore it. So, judge or tolerate. Judge or tolerate. Is that it? Isn't there another option?

We see this in our culture all over the place. Conservative or liberal. Lock down or shut up, or open up. Or shut up. Masks on, masks off. One or two, one or two. We're nearing the end of our sermon series called Greater Things, and soon we're going to start talking about Christmas, and that's going to be cool and you're going to enjoy that. But one of the greater things that Jesus brings is, he often brings a third way. You've heard me say this before, when Jesus was faced with a false dichotomy, only two choices, he always had a third way. And it wasn't a mushy compromise. It wasn't just meeting in the middle. It was some creative alternative that you just never would think of, something entirely different.

I recently saw an article about how the lockdown is affecting zoo animals. They're bored without all the visitors. So the Kansas City Zoo took their penguins to an art museum. And the zoo said, "We're always looking for ways to stimulate their lives. They seem to react better to Caravaggio than to Monet." Why would they like Caravaggio better? I have no idea.

In all of my life, I have never once thought about penguins in an art museum, let alone seen penguins in an art museum. Only in 2020. It's just so different. Is it one or two? A or B? Neither. It's penguins in an art museum. Something you just have never thought of before. And Jesus' third way is often so much better, so much more creative, so much more healing, so much more life-giving. And we see that in the story that we just read, where Jesus heals a centurion's servant. And it shows us how third way Jesus is, and how we can be third-way people in a false dichotomy world.

Now, centurion was a Roman soldier who commanded a company of about a hundred other soldiers, and he comes to Jesus and he says, "My servant is paralyzed. Please heal him." And Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him." And this is the first characteristic of being third way. Jesus here leads with grace. You got to understand the situation. The centurion is part of the Imperial forces that were oppressing Israel. And the Romans were not nice people, they were not Girl Scouts. The centurion is here, part of enforcing the Roman oppression of Israel. So, guilt by implication.

And at this point here, Jesus is faced with two options: Either blast the guy for his sins, or just ignore them. Judge, or tolerate. And at first it looks like Jesus is choosing to just ignore his sins, because he's going to go heal the servant for him. But it's a little more complicated than that. Jesus doesn't blast him, but he also doesn't completely let him off the hook either. Instead, he leads with grace. "I'll heal your servant, yes." He gives him grace first.

It's the same thing he does with Zacchaeus, who was a tax collector who used the power of the Roman army to extort money from his fellow Jews. And all Jesus says to him is, "I want to go have dinner with you." And Zacchaeus says, "I'm going to give everything I stole back." It's the same move Jesus makes with the woman who was caught in adultery. The religious leaders bring her to him and say, "Should we stone her, or should we let her go?" One or two, A or B, judge or tolerate. And Jesus says to the woman, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

Grace, neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more, truth. But he leads with grace. Which in some ways is infuriating, because sometimes we think, "No, no, no, you need to tell them all the ways that they're screwing up. You need to tell them all the ways that they're sinful. Otherwise, they're not going to stop sinning." And he just doesn't go there, ever. There's only one exception where Jesus blasts people, religious leaders. He blasted the religious leaders. Everyone else, Jesus leads with grace.

Now, the key word there is leads. The question is, leads where? Well, he leads them to truth and repentance. He leads them to self-examination that allows them to see their own sin. But he leads with grace. Think of it this way. When someone accuses you of something, what's your first instinct? I know mine is to fight back, get defensive, and accusing people. That's what folks do when they're accused. Accusing people rarely works. It usually just makes people hang onto their narrative all the more tightly.

So Jesus leads with grace. "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." Grace, truth, and repentance. But the order matters. First comes grace. This Roman centurion, he's not a nice guy. He knows that he's got stuff inside of him. He's been part of things he shouldn't have been part of, he's done things he shouldn't have done, and he knows it. And the reason we know that he knows it, is because the first thing he says to Jesus is, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. But just say the word and my servant will be healed."

This is a shocking thing for a Roman centurion to say. Because you got to understand, Rome ruled the world. They thought they were always right. And in Roman culture, to admit you have a weakness, to show humility, to admit you have flaws, was considered a terrible weakness. It was not a virtue, especially in a centurion. And so for this centurion to say, "I'm not worthy" is shocking. What's happened?

Well, just like was Zacchaeus, somehow Jesus' grace toward him has opened him up to do some self-examination of his own sinfulness. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved. The Bible says it's God's kindness that leads us to repentance. And it's when I know that the scripture says that there is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, then I can ask the Holy spirit, "Show me my sin," because I don't have to be afraid of being condemned for it.

So I can say with the Psalmist, "Search me, O God, and know my heart, and see if there is any wicked way within me." And that is a prayer Christians should pray daily. When presented with Jesus' grace, the centurion was able to start to admit his own weaknesses, his own flaws, "I'm not worthy." It's when I have no fear of condemnation that I can admit to myself that I live in a world that where there is a raging pandemic called sin, and it is 100% contagious, and it can infect every part of me. It can infect how I think about money, how I think about sex, how I think about people at work, how I think about people of a different race, or how I treat my family, or all kinds of stuff.

But we can approach those things without being defensive because we no longer have to fear being condemned, because in Christ Jesus there's no more condemnation. So we can say, "Jesus, show me the places where my sin-soaked culture either consciously or unconsciously has warped how I understand sex, or race, or money, or power, or people around me."

And I cannot only pray that to Jesus, but also, free from condemnation, I can ask some friends to tell me where they see sin in my life. Which I do, with friends that I know that are not going to condemn me. "Where do you see sin in my life?" It doesn't need to feel threatening to say, "Here's a problem I have. Here's a sin I have." And if we could all lead with grace for each other, we become the kind of community where we can have those conversations free of condemnation. And it gets us out of the endless cycles of accusation and defensiveness between husbands and wives, between people of different races, between people of color and white people, and people of different races. It gets us out of that accusation, defensiveness cycle with parents, and kids, and friends and friends, and coworkers and coworkers.

It's not that hard truth doesn't need to be told. It does. And certainly at a societal level, we have to call out the sins of our culture of racism, or greed, or promiscuity, or corruption. And yes, Jesus does blast the religious leaders. So, I think there's probably a time and a place for accusation and blasting. But I also know I'm not Jesus, so I want to be really careful about that. But interpersonally, starting with grace often leads to repentance. It's not tolerance. It's not judgment. It's a penguin in an art museum. Something just different,

When I did college ministry, I used to meet with a guy on the football team about once a month. Big, huge guy. He could have eaten me for lunch, he was just huge. And he would tell me about how drunk he was getting on the weekends. And he was having a lot of casual sex with a lot of different women. And this is a different guy, by the way, than the one I told you about a couple weeks ago. Similar theme, different guy.

And at first for a long time, I just gave him grace. I listened, I got to know him, I got to understand his heart. I prayed for him, I showed him I care. Because people don't care what you know until they know that you care. But then one day he told me that he was estranged from his father, because his father had drank too much, and then left the family for another woman. And that had hurt him very deeply. And I got one of those nudges from the Holy Spirit, and I just knew it was the Holy Spirit. And so I said, "I just got to point something out. You do a lot of drinking yourself."

And he said, "Yeah, that's different. I'm in college." And I said, "And you're with a different woman every other month." And he said, "Yeah, but what's your point?" And I said, "It seems to me you're on a road that is leading you to be just like your dad. But I see you differently. I've seen you stand up to peer pressure. You've got guts. You can do that. You don't need to be drinking to fit in with the crowd."

And I've seen how much respect you show to me and to your friends, and I think you could show that kind of respect to women, as well. Who do you want to be when you're 40? Don't you want to be the man who leads the crowd rather than follows the crowd? Who is faithful to his wife, who passes on honorable manhood to his son? And I think you've got it in you to be that guy. But you got to start right now, because that kind of character takes a lifetime of practice."

And then he was quiet and he just looked at me for a while, and I was briefly thinking, "Please don't hit me," because he was very big. And then he said, "You and I meet about once a month, right?" And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "Could we make that once a week?" And I said, "I would be happy to do that." And over the next couple of years, because transformation takes time, years, he became a different man. I led with grace, which helped him hear the truth that he needed to hear, that needed to be said. Opened him up to do some self-examination. Gave him a vision of who he could be through the power of Jesus.

Now, does this always work? No. Lots of people never want to hear the truth no matter how much grace you give them. But I would just point out, blasting people doesn't usually work either. And it's significant to me that in the Gospels, the only other time a centurion shows up in the Gospels is at Jesus' crucifixion, where a centurion becomes the first Gentile to recognize that Jesus is God when he says, "Surely this man was the Son of God."

Now we don't know if it's the same centurion as in this story. But symbolically, Jesus leading with grace with this centurion led to a centurion recognizing that Jesus was God, and that Rome was wrong. Accusation shuts people down, grace opens people up.

Second third-way thing that we see here is a confounding loyalty. In Jesus' day, there was all kinds of factions. There was a pro-Rome faction, let's cooperate with Rome. And then there was a rebel against Rome faction. And Jesus here just ignores both of those factions. He's not controlled by anyone's agenda, except for God's. Jesus said, "I only do what I see the father doing." His only loyalty is to what God is doing in the world. And that's a confusing loyalty, because it gets out of the either this faction or that faction thing.

Here we see his focus seems mostly to be transforming Romans. It's not pro or anti, just transform Romans. To be a genuine Christ-follower is to be an unbelievably independent thinker. There is no party, no culture, no tribe that we fully belong to. The cross says that sin is real and has to be paid for. And a lot of secular folks don't like to hear that, but the cross also is incredibly open to everyone, which sometimes religious folks have a hard time dealing with.

To be third way means we submit our politics to scripture, not the other way around. And all of scripture, not just the verses that we like. And that will be confusing to people sometimes. And it's hard work. So for instance, for me, my best read of scripture leads me to be very concerned about protecting the sanctity of life from conception to grave, as well as caring for immigrants in our midst, no matter how they got here. So what does that make me? Liberal? Conservative? A penguin in an art museum?

Now, I also recognize there are complexities in those issues. I know that as a man I can never fully understand some of the horrible situations that women find themselves in. And I know that I'm called scripturally to seek third-way solutions. Which is why I'm grateful for organizations that give emotional, financial, spiritual support so women can choose to carry their pregnancy to term. I also know that the Bible really isn't clear on what a nation's immigration policy should be. I just know we're supposed to care for them when they're here.

Now, my point is not that you agree with me. I suspect many of you don't agree with me one way or the other. My point is, my best efforts to submit my politics to scripture have led me to a confusing politics that doesn't quite conform to the liberal versus conservative paradigms we got going. As Pastor Tim Keller says, "How do Christians fit into a two-party system? We don't. We don't. We're loyal to God."

Pastor Pradeepan Jeeva, who's at Kalos Church here in Bellevue, he says this, "The church isn't neutral or peculiar. The church isn't left or right, it's salt and light. Jesus isn't donkey or elephant. He's the lamb of God, just different."

Third third-way characteristic is the power of and. This summer, Anthony Ballard pointed out something in his sermon that I thought was very insightful. He said, "Jesus ministered to both the centurion, the law enforcement of his day, and the thief on the cross, the looter of his day." That's the power of and. Right now we're in a culture where there are churches for younger people and churches for older people, but not both.

Across the country, liberals are leaving churches to find churches where everyone thinks just like they do, and conservatives are doing the same thing. I don't see that in the Bible anywhere. I

see both old and young. I see Jew and Gentile. I see liberals of their day and conservatives of their day. And Bel Pres, I know your heart, and I think we could be that church for the world. Lead with grace.

A confounding loyalty; the power of and; and finally, generously creative. Rather than just complain about the problems, or be mad about the problems in the world, or try to ignore the problems so that we can stay comfortable, there's this third thing that people of God do, which is to give of their time, and their talents, and their treasure to create solutions that heal the world. Jesus here heals the centurion's heart, as well as his servant's body, and creates a new reality. We are called not to just idly complain about the way things are, but with Jesus' power, dream and dare for the way things could be, and create new realities for people. And Bel Pres, you do this so well. You guys have been amazing, amazing through this whole COVID thing. Because of you, we've been able to help 700 families along through Jubilee REACH, families who've been affected by the lockdown.

And we've been able to provide those families with groceries and food because of you. We've been able to give \$1.5 million away to COVID relief to folks here in our church, in our community, and around the world. On top of all of the other things we normally do in places like Rwanda, and Cambodia, and Greece, and Jubilee REACH, and Eastside Academy, and Seattle Angels, and KidREACH.

Rather than curse the darkness, we light a candle, and create new realities for people. Which feels so much better than either being mad about the problems, or depressed about the problems, or trying to ignore the problems. Instead, we have a third alternative. We are generously creative, and make new realities for people. And the reason we can do this, and the way we do this, and the power to do this, it's not in us. This kind of creativity doesn't come from us. It comes from Jesus, and our faith in him.

It's interesting, when Jesus sees the centurion's faith, he says, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." It's kind of interesting because by conventional definitions, the centurion does not have great faith. By conventional definitions. He's never been to a Bible study, doesn't know the Nicene Creed, never prayed the Sinner's Prayer. So why is his faith great? Because it's not about the amount of faith you have, it's about the object of your faith.

Sometimes you'll hear preachers say things like, "If you only have enough faith, then X, Y, or Z can happen." Nonsense. You can believe with all your heart in the wrong thing. Pastor Tim Keller uses the analogy of two mountain climbers who fall on a ledge. And there are only two ways off the ledge, a rocky outcrop over here, and a rocky outcrop over there. And the first climber says, "I know for sure this is the way. I have a hundred percent faith. I am 100% confident this is the way to get out." And the second climber says, "I don't know. I'm not sure, but I think that way is the way to get out. Not this way, that way. But I'm not sure. I don't know. I kind of doubt."

So they both step, and the first climber falls to his death. And the second climber steps on solid ground and climbs up. Who's saved? The man who believed with all of his heart? No, the man who believed in the right rock. It's not about the amount of faith you have. It's about the object of faith.

So if you are riddled with doubt, but your faith is still in Jesus, that's enough. And Jesus is the reason that we can lead with grace, because we've experienced his grace. Jesus is the reason that we can have this confusing loyalty that crosses all kinds of ideologies, because our only loyalty is to him. It's Jesus is the one who can give us the creativity to come up with new solutions that create new realities for people.

Two men from this church, Pastor Alexis from New Hope Revival, who you know, and Tim Cook, who many of you also know, started a business that provides in-home care for elderly and for home bound people. And it's not your typical business plan. Lots of companies do good things, but it's usually profits first, with some socially responsible stuff sprinkled in. But these guys, they've reversed that. They've turned that on its head, and their main goal is to bring flourishing to traditionally marginalized communities such as immigrants by employing them, and make a profit. And they are unabashedly Christian. Their website says that they are founded with biblical principles of truth, and honesty, and compassion, and trust.

And it's third way in a number of ways. So let me list some of them. First, it's founded by black and white owners, crossing racial and national barriers, and they share the ownership 50/50. Second, they go over and above to provide historically marginalized groups with advancement opportunities, higher than market rate wages, flexible hours, interest-free loans, mentoring programs, all to break cycles of poverty.

Number three, they encourage the development of their employees, even if that means the employees leave after they've poured all these resources into developing them, and the employees leave for a better opportunity. They celebrate that, because the thriving of their employees is part of their bottom line.

Fourth, they equip minority employees to grow through the ranks, and eventually become owners of the company managing their own locations. It's not charity, it's empowerment. Fifth, they were originally going to start it as a nonprofit, but then they responded to God's call that business is blessed by God, that profits rightly used are not evil, and that our jobs are a pathway to human flourishing. So what is that? Is that socialist, capitalist, or is it a penguin in an art museum? Something just different?

Sixth, Tim says for him, part of doing this company came after years of wrestling with the idea that the only way to do meaningful ministry was to be a pastor or a missionary, a false dichotomy pastors have created. Either you're a pastor doing God's work, or you're just a secular worker. Nonsense. Theirs is a third way that combines business and ministry. It's the power of and. Profits and human flourishing, immigrants and native born. And it creates new

realities by helping marginalized people with a hand up, while giving biblically-based, loving care to elderly who need it.

Now, my point is not that you have to go start a business. My question is this: How can you be third way this week? How can Jesus help you be third way this week? Maybe it's leading with grace in a conversation. Maybe it's using some of your time, or your talent, or your treasure to create a new reality for people. Maybe it's to have a loyalty that crosses all kinds of ideological lines that's confusing, but it's based on following Jesus.

When our kids were little, we would always try the love and logic form of parenting, where you give them choices. However, my son could always see straight through it. You'd say something to him like, "Do you want me to put your coat on, or would you like to put your coat on yourself?" And he would say, "That's not a choice. No coat."

I think so often in life we sometimes feel like that's not a choice. Those are two lousy options. But greater things are possible. I refuse to give into the trend where conservatives find churches where people think just like they do, and liberals do the same. Greater things are possible. You can have both, and love each other, and learn from each other. And Bel Pres, I believe that we can be that church. I refuse to give into the narrative that tells me that I either support this group of people, or that group of people, but I can't support both. Beg to differ. Yes I can, and yes I will.

When faced with a conflict, I refuse to give into the thinking that says the only two options I have are either fight or flight, get mad or get gone, when there's this third thing called reconciliation that's harder, but better. Greater things are possible when we reject the false dichotomies of our culture and opt instead for Jesus' third way. It's not one, it's not two. It's not A, it's not B. It's a penguin in an art museum. Something completely different. And his name is Jesus, and he has a better way.

So Lord, we pray that you would make us weird. Make us different, make us third-way people who break down every false dichotomy, every either/or, this or that, A or B, them or us. Lord, help us to see with your eyes, create new realities for people, be refreshingly different, and we'll give you the glory. In your name, Lord. Amen.

All In Small Group Discussion Questions:

Opening Question:

- It's been an interesting week, and many of us are weary and tired. How are you doing and how can we pray for each other?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- Where do you feel stuck with what feels like two bad options? What might Jesus' 3rd way be in that situation?
- In what ways is Jesus different than what we see in the world? In what ways does he call us to be different?

Closing Question and Application:

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?