

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

1 Kings 8: 22 – 23, 41 – 43
Galatians 1: 1 – 12

Psalm 96: 1 – 9
Luke 7: 1 – 10

“I tell you, not even in Israel have I seen such faith!”

Today’s reading from Luke contains so many unexpected things. There is a centurion – a Roman soldier – who has a slave for whom he cares deeply and whom he treats kindly. We don’t expect that. We also don’t expect the Jewish elders to care deeply about this centurion – a foreigner AND an oppressor – but they do because he has cared deeply for them – loving them and even building a synagogue for them. And then, we are surprised at the unexpected humility of the centurion, a leader in the Roman army, who professes his unworthiness. This, despite the fact that his Jewish friends have just proclaimed his worth to Jesus.

Then there is the bit which amazes Jesus – the faith which the centurion, an outsider, expresses. Not unlike the Samaritan in Jesus’ parable who takes such good care of the injured man on the road to Jericho, and not unlike the Syrophenician woman who wins the argument with Jesus about healing her daughter, this Gentile, this non-Jew, this outsider, expresses a faith unparalleled in Jesus’ interactions with the Jews – including among his own disciples! Jesus doesn’t expect such faith in this Gentile – well, maybe he does, but, as the Rev. Dr. John Fairless writes, Jesus certainly uses the expectations of the crowd to his advantage. And then, to top everything else off, Jesus heals the slave, sight unseen, from a distance. Jesus heals the man simply because of the faith of the centurion who *expects* that Jesus is powerful enough to do that. God is so very often such a surprising God – a God who is always doing new and unexpected things.

Jesus is amazed by the faith of an outsider from the people of Israel. Today’s lessons have a strong theme of welcoming the outsider. In the book of Kings, Solomon is standing in front of the altar of the Temple as he consecrates it for use. In his prayer, Solomon is, of course, praying to God, but also giving some instruction to his people indirectly. One of the many things that Solomon requests is that the prayers of a foreigner, someone coming from a distant land and who is not one of the Jews, be heard by God just as God would hear the prayers of God’s people. Solomon wants everyone in the world to come to know that God, Yahweh, is the true God of all of Creation. This is Israel at its best, being a light unto the nations. Solomon’s prayer contains an implicit message to the people of Israel – welcome the stranger and help them know the power and mercy of God. Solomon wants the Temple he has just built for God to be a house of prayer for people from every family, language, people and nation.

The psalmist echoes this telling of God’s glory among the nations which will enable all people to bless God’s name. All the earth is to tremble before this God who has made the heavens and the earth, the God who is above all gods. Everyone everywhere will come to know God and, together, *be* the people of God. There will be no outsiders.

Our lessons today, from 1 Kings, the Psalms and Luke (and really all of the Gospel of Luke), are about the acceptance and inclusion of strangers, outsiders, aliens, into the household of God. You might hear in that last phrase an echo from our baptismal liturgy – the part where we welcome the newly

baptized into the household of God. That same baptismal liturgy is where we vow to 'seek and serve Christ in all persons,' and to 'respect the dignity of every human being.' Our biblical story is mostly one of inclusivity and grace. While we can certainly find texts to say the opposite, to speak to the value of keeping the purity of the people of God by excluding others for a variety of reasons, there are far more scriptures which speak of a God of love and inclusion. A God who welcomes all people into God's church, God's temple, God's mosque, God's community, God's house.

The Rev. Dr. Delmar Chilton relates a story from about 20 years ago. Chilton, who is an ordained Lutheran pastor, was serving on staff at a summer church camp one summer. Their bishop came out to speak to everyone and he was wearing a t-shirt from Lutheran World Relief (LWR), analogous to our Episcopal Relief and Development. The bishop then told the audience why he was wearing this shirt.

LWR had a project in India to help local people develop better agricultural methods and sanitation practices. Chilton notes that at that time, there were 1.5 million Lutherans in India (nearly as many as there are Episcopalians in the US!), so this was not something being 'imposed from on high,' but rather developed as a ministry from within. It was something being done by the Lutherans in India themselves. The idea was to first train a local person in the necessary techniques and then put that person in charge.

In one of the villages where this project was being implemented, there had been a couple with only one child. The couple had had six pregnancies in six years and every one of those babies had died before they reached the age of one. The parents believed that the devil had snatched their children away from them. Finally, a seventh child was born. A daughter. Her parents named her "Garbage" in Hindi, in the belief that if the devil heard the parents calling her "Garbage," the devil would not be interested in her and she might live.

Can you imagine, Chilton asks, growing up being called by such a disgusting name by everyone, including your parents? This girl grew up being an outcast in her own village, which was itself a village of outcasts – people on the lowest rung of society. She was an outcast from the outcasts. At least until the Lutherans came to the village and began their project. Garbage was somehow chosen to be the leader of this program, and as they do in India, she was given a title to show her position. Poor little Garbage became the "Esteemed and Venerable Garbage." With that new title and her leadership position, Garbage acquired a new status within her community. The one who had been outside was now inside; the last had become first, the lowly had been lifted up. The nobody whom even the devil hadn't wanted had become somebody.

That's how God works with us humans. Where we humans keep drawing boundaries and lines in the sand, God keeps erasing them and stepping over them. We humans love to segregate and divide between insiders and outsiders, haves and have-nots. We love to pigeon-hole people and put them in a box and label them. But, as Chilton says, God takes our labels and turns them into titles. God takes our boxes, turns them upside down and makes them thrones. God takes our fear-driven alienation and turns it into faith-filled reconciliation. We are bunch of strangers and aliens whose names get changed from nobody to somebody by the transformative power of God's love.

God's mercy and grace and love cannot be held in or held back by our feeble machinations for one-upsmanship over others who are not like us, whatever "like us" might mean. Instead, God's mercy and grace and love wash over a world filled with all sorts and conditions of humanity as our Prayer Book calls it. God's expansive, unfettered, abundant love runs throughout the course of Scripture, throughout all time and place and throughout all creation. And yes, throughout God's church – despite us sometimes, and because of us at other times.

To bring this into our context, who are the insiders and who are the outsiders in our own congregation? What are we doing to help the outsiders become insiders, to help God erase those lines? How about our wider community? How and when and what are we doing to help God turn labels into titles? Ultimately, it is of course up to God to decide who's in and who's out, or if there is anyone out at all. God is the God of the unexpected and we just might be surprised. As one writer has put it, if and when we ever get to heaven, don't stare!

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