

2 Pentecost, Proper 4, Yr. C
May 29, 2016
Luke 7:1-10

As you know, this past weekend I was at my granddaughter's HS graduation. There were 6 valedictorians and 1 salutatorian, all of whom spoke, although quite briefly. Good thing, actually, otherwise, we'd still be there! One of the young women went from the mundane to the cosmic, when she said that one good thing about leaving HS was that you wouldn't have to ask for permission to go to the bathroom anymore. But then she finished, quite on the opposite end of the spectrum, by challenging her classmates to "go out and save the world." My granddaughter, who was one of the speakers, took a similar tack, advising her fellow graduates not to be limited by saying and thinking "If only..." If only I had more talent, or brains, or energy... No, she said, take the gifts you have and put them to work in the world. None of this was explicitly theological, of course, but it certainly expressed the Christian vision of working to help make the kingdom come and the Jewish idea of *tikkun olam*, the mending of the world. Both of these ideas bestow religious dignity on those who work to eliminate the evils of the world – and they usually do it by doing one small act of goodness, one small act of kindness at a time. Christian and Jewish teachers have said that each generation has its own seekers, its own leaders and its own challenges. Each of us has our own task, our unique gifts, our singular contribution to make. As long as there is hunger, poverty and treatable disease in the world, there is work for us to do. As long as nations fight, and people hate and corruption exists in the halls of power; as long as there is unemployment and poverty, homelessness and despair, our task is not yet done and we can hear, if we listen carefully enough, the voice of God asking us, as he asked those first humans, "WHERE ARE YOU?"

Last week, I understand that you heard an excellent sermon on the Trinity, which emphasized the idea of loving relationship between and among the three persons. Loving relationship. That's what those of us who attended the conference on engaging one another across difference also heard. How do we make room for relationship, and for loving relationship, when people are different from us – in all the many ways we've become aware of difference. Katherine Jefforts Schori, when she was still the Presiding Bishop, talked about the fact that we human beings have a long history of discounting and devaluing difference, finding it, she said, offensive or even evil. She went on to say that that tendency leads to oppression, slavery and even to war. But, she pointed out, we have another, holier impulse which, when acted upon, leads to freedom, dignity and human flourishing. That impulse leads us to see the glory of God in other human beings and in the creation around us – in fact, she said, learning to see that glory, that presence, was what the Christian life was all about. We're challenged to see that glory, that image of God, even in "those people" whoever they are for us.

This issue has been around for a very long time. Perhaps it seems more urgent now that we finally figure out how to deal with it, as the world shrinks and as our aggression has ever more powerful consequences. But, as I said, it's been around for a long time. That's what Paul is dealing with. You remember that he had started the church in Galatia and then continued his travels. But, after he left, others arrived, preaching a different gospel. Paul's message was one of radical inclusion of the Gentiles who wanted to become followers of Christ. The early

Christians had all been Jews and the thought was that one had to become Jewish before one could become a Christian. But Paul said something very different: NO, he said, the heart of the revelation of Jesus, the Gospel, was the graciousness of divine love – and it's in accepting that love and then living out of it, that one becomes a Christian. That Gospel truth that Christ revealed, that every human being is the object of divine love, is what sets us free, Paul said. To set up obstacles to that is to pervert the Gospel. Paul's critics were horrified and accused him of watering down the truth just to get as many converts as possible. No, Paul insists to these Galatians who he thinks have run off the tracks, the Gospel of love made manifest in Christ's life, death and resurrection, is greater than every religion, every civil or societal authority, every division humans want to construct.

And then that's that wonderful story in Luke. There's the long distance healing of the centurion's slave, of course, and the faith of the centurion who saw in Jesus an authority that meant that when he prayed something would happen. But there's something else I'd like us to look at. Remember that the Romans were the occupying army in Palestine. As such, the usual attitude of the Jews would be that the Romans were hated oppressors. And from the other side, the Romans saw the Jews as a filthy, misguided, superstitious race. Both sides would have seen the other side as "THOSE PEOPLE" as the OUTSIDER – someone to be feared and hated. But that's not the picture here. Here, instead we see people of different cultures and understandings connecting to each other and doing good – mending the world. The Roman officer had a foot in both worlds. You'll note that the text says that he was loved and respected by the Jewish community, who go to speak to Jesus on his behalf. "He loves our people," they say – he even built our synagogue. OK – I'm guessing we're reading along in Luke and we hear that and, if we catch it at all, we probably think something like WOW! That's really generous. I wonder what the salary is for a centurion. But if we think about it just a bit longer, we'll realize how incredible that is – to put it in modern day terms, it would be like an Israeli officer building a mosque in the occupied West Bank. As building bridges to the "other" goes, it's pretty mind-boggling! I wonder how well that would be received today.

You'll also note the text says that Jesus was AMAZED. That's rarely the case – it's quite often the case that people are amazed by Jesus, but rare that he's amazed himself. He says he hasn't found such faith in all Israel. What's going on with that Roman, do you think? And what can we learn from him? The differences between him and those surrounding him are many: there's a power difference, a wealth difference, a religious difference, a nationality difference, a professional difference, an ethnic difference. And yet – he cares enough about his slave to try to get help for him, so we can know he's compassionate. He must be unprejudiced because he's made connections and perhaps even friends in the Jewish community. We know he's generous; he must be courageous. But I'm thinking that in order to bridge the gap between the two communities he must have, at some point, been curious enough, open enough, to find out what these Jewish people were all about. And if you put all that together, he allowed himself to be a conduit for God's action in the world. No wonder Jesus was amazed.

How hard it is for us to get to that point where we can bridge difference, where we can understand that God loves each of us totally and that, despite our differences, love can free us to do good together. The Jews, way back in the post-exilic period, developed the idea of

dackhei shalom – which means “the way of peace.” It was the idea that the covenantal love revealed to them by God needed to be applied to everyone, including those not of their faith. Jonathan Sacks, who until just recently was the chief rabbi in England, discusses this idea and says that “good deeds – deeds that make a difference in the lives of our fellow human beings – constitute, as it were, a universal language... There is a universal human condition. The physical pain of believer and unbeliever are alike. Poverty humiliates all who suffer from it, as does oppression in whatever form. Tears, he says, know no national boundaries. (*To Heal a Fractured World*)

So, going out to save the world. Perhaps it begins with our intention to live as Christ lived and with the prayer that he will open our eyes to see the suffering around us, and the many ways in which we can live with more open and loving hearts. Perhaps saving the world, at least for most of us, isn't some big act that affects millions of people, but, instead, consists of the open eyes and open hearts that perform one small act of loving-kindness after another. Let me close with a quote by Howard Zinn that I received at a recent meeting.

“What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places – and there are so many – where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory

Amen.