

Pastor Josh Ferris

5.29.16

Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

1 Kings 8:22-23, 41-43 | Psalm 96 | Galatians 1:1-12 | **Luke 7:1-10**

I've never been able to verify if this story actually happened or not, but I've seen it so many times online and in emails that I thought I'd tell it this morning, trusting that even those stories that aren't true can still have a lot of *truth in them*.

As the story goes, a big mega-church decided to call a new pastor. They were all excited for the Sunday when they would meet him for the first time, but they had no idea that their new pastor had planned a surprise for them.

As people arrived at church that morning, they noticed a homeless man wandering around. His stuff was piled up in the flowerbed out front. His hair was tangled and messy, his clothes ripped and torn, he looked rough, and he smelled *bad*. Only a couple people said hello to him, and the rest just ignored him, their eyes sliding right past, dismissing him as an interruption or bother as they arrived dressed in their Sunday best.

After a little while he started asking for spare change, and people started to become angry, telling the man to go away. When it was time for worship to begin, he tried to sit in the front of the sanctuary, but the ushers forced him to sit in the back row by himself.

The church council president stood up to introduce their new pastor, and people began clapping, looking around for their new spiritual leader. But the clapping faded and then stopped, you could have heard a pin drop, as the man who had been forced to sit by himself in

the back of the sanctuary stood up and came to the microphone, smiled, and introduced himself as their new pastor.

They were shocked.

The man they had dismissed as one thing turned out to be something else entirely.

We often categorize people, all of us. Part of it is just a functional necessity, because we need a way to think about people in large groups. But whenever we place people into a category, it inevitably reduces them. Categories come with predetermined judgments and expectations and assumptions, and these things prevent us from seeing someone as they truly are. Categories can strip people of their identity, even take away their humanity and value.

But the truth is that people don't fit neatly into categories, because people are complex and diverse and loved by God.

Take the centurion in our Gospel reading this morning. If ever there was a person who couldn't be neatly placed into a category, it's him. Remember that Jesus and most of his earliest disciples were Jews who lived under the brutal oppression of the Roman Empire. This centurion was a member of the Roman army, he commanded 100 troops, and so he symbolized that oppression and the threat of violence under which the Jewish people lived every day. Maybe that's why he didn't come to Jesus himself to ask that his slave be healed, because he knew he would be dismissed as the enemy, for in a world of 'us' and 'them,' he was *most certainly* part of the 'them' – unwanted, unwelcome, despised.

Instead, the centurion sent some Jewish elders to Jesus, and they told him that despite the fact that this man is a centurion, he's still worthy of Jesus' time and attention. In fact, they

say, this centurion loves the Jewish people, and has even spent his own money to build their synagogue so they could worship together.

This is a man who defies categories. A Roman centurion, yet a man who is kind and benevolent. A slave owner, yet someone who speaks up for a slave in order to save their life. A symbol of Roman oppression, yet a man who respects the Jewish faith. A Gentile, but also someone who associated with Jews and had the love and respect of his Jewish neighbors. A foreigner, but also a man who had faith in Jesus. In fact, Jesus later said about the man, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." (v. 9)

So which category does this man fit into?

Only one: beloved child of God.

And yet we insist on seeing the world in categories that divide us, rather than unite us. There's something deep within the sinful part of us that loves to divide the world between 'us' and 'them.' We see it everywhere. The racism that divides and determines value based on skin color. The sexism that considers women to be less capable, less competent, less intelligent, less holy. Our world is divided constantly between rich and poor, gay and straight, young and old, Christian and Muslim. When we don't understand people, or don't like them, we're tempted to think of them as 'them' – not 'us' – and to fear them.

And this is what our current political scene is all about. Our nation has embraced the lie that America is about democrats versus republicans, and *your* side is 'us' and the *other* side is 'them,' and 'them' is the enemy. Right now we have a presidential candidate who has sold this narrative, dividing the world into 'us' common folk and 'them' rich folk who are to blame for all

our problems, a worldview which just encourages us to reduce some of our neighbors into categories until we no longer see them as human beings.

We have a presidential nominee who encourages us to see the world as '*us*' versus '*them*,' preying upon people's fears to fan the flames of anger, hate, racism, and xenophobia. We hear that it's '*us*' versus '*the Muslims*,' who are to be feared and even harmed. We hear that it's '*us*' versus '*the immigrants*,' who are to be feared and hated. We hear that it's '*us*' versus '*the foreigners*.'

How appropriate, then, that in our reading today, Jesus uses a *foreigner* to illustrate faith, tearing down the walls of '*us*' and '*them*' that divide, showing us that God's grace is for *all* people, and that faith is often found in unexpected places and unexpected people.

Jesus rejects the worldview of '*us*' and '*them*,' he rejects categories that dehumanize people, he rejects the idea that our God is just a tribal God, and as his followers, so do we.

The notion of a tribal God who is for '*us*' but against '*them*' is an ancient idea. For a long time, most of the world was polytheistic – that is, they believed in many gods. People believed that gods were connected to certain areas of land, and that each tribe or nation had their own god. And so wars were often seen not just as a battle between people or tribes, but a battle between their respective gods, to see who was stronger and mightier.

Even when the ancient Israelites came to believe that there was only one God, who had created the heavens and the earth, even still the tribal mentality that that God is for '*us*' and against '*them*' remained. Throughout the Old Testament, the Israelite people struggled to understand that God wasn't just for '*us*.' They didn't get that being God's chosen people didn't mean God accepted them and rejected everyone else, it meant that God was giving them a

mission to share his love and light with the whole world, so that everyone would come to know and believe.

It would have been easy for Jesus to dismiss this foreign, Gentile centurion, and to refuse to heal his servant. It's probably what most of the people around him – including his disciples – expected him to do. In his first-century culture, foreigners were hated, Gentiles were not part of God's people, and centurions were evil.

But this is the radical message that Jesus brought: that God is God for *everyone*. God's love and grace are available to *everyone*. Even those people we try to place in categories. Even those people we consider to be '*them*' in our lives. Even those people we fear. Even foreigners and people of other nations, religions, and ethnicities.

Jesus constantly pushed people to see this beautiful and wondrous truth. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, more than any of the other Gospel accounts, Jesus constantly proclaimed that when it comes to God's love for people, when it comes to how God sees the world, there is no '*us*' and '*them*,' there's only one category: beloved child of God.

It's in Luke – and nowhere else – that the angels appeared on Christmas to bring good news of great joy for *all* people. (Luke 2:10-11) It's in Luke – and nowhere else – that Simeon proclaimed that Jesus came to bring salvation to *all* nations and tribes. (Luke 2:29-32) It's in Luke where Jesus told stories about God using people of faith who *weren't* Israelites (Luke 4:25-27), where Jesus sent his disciples out far and wide to proclaim the good news, even among the Gentiles and Samaritans. (Luke 9:1-6, versus Matthew 10:5)

In fact, that parable of the Good Samaritan – you know, where it's the *dirty, unclean* person who loves their neighbor – that's found only in Luke. (Luke 10:25-37) So is the story

where Jesus heals ten lepers, and only the *foreigner* returns to say thank you. (Luke 17:11-19)

The parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:8-32), whom the Father welcomes home with open arms; the story of the despised and hated tax collector named Zacchaeus, who repents and gives away more than half his wealth to the poor (Luke 19:1-10) – all of these stories are found in the book of Luke, and *only* in the book of Luke.

And that's why, in this morning's reading from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus refused to see the centurion according to any other category, and instead saw him for what he truly was: a beloved child of God.

The love of God breaks down all barriers that separate people. It shatters our categories of '*us*' and '*them*.' It destroys our wish for a tribal God, one based on ethnicity or nationality or social standing or anything else, and instead proclaims to us the most beautiful and glorious truth, the one that our hearts and souls yearn to hear, that in Christ, God's love and grace are available to all, *even us!* God's hears *everyone's* prayers! God doesn't send *anyone* away! Through Jesus, God's forgiveness and favor are offered to everyone. And instead of seeing people based on categories, divided and separated, '*us*' and '*them*,' as his followers we are free to see people for who and what they truly are: complex, sinful, redeemed, beloved children of God. May we see one another, and may the barriers and categories come tumbling down. Amen.