

2 Pentecost Yr C, 29/05/2016
Lk 7:1-10
Rev. Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson

“Outsiders become insiders, befriending ‘the enemy’”

From the hellish scenes of World War II in Poland comes the story of Yitzak, a Jewish physician who, with his wife and child, fled from Warsaw and hid in the countryside. Known for his compassion and skill in cardiac care. Yitzak was held in high regard by Jews and non-Jews alike.

Leopold was a minor Nazi official stationed in Warsaw. He did what he was told, not because he disliked Jews, but because it was his job. His job was to study census records and provide his supervisors with information about who in the city was “tainted” with Jewish blood.

Leopold and Yitzak had met casually; their relationship had been cordial, but cautious. Leopold heard rumours that Yitzak was hiding in the countryside, but he didn't pursue it until the day when the chest pains came.

The physician at the hospital concluded that Leopold was having a heart attack, and said, “It's a shame that Yitzak isn't here. He could save this man's life.”

Word soon reached Yitzak that he was needed to save a human life. Ignoring the danger to himself. Yitzak crept into the city in the middle of the night to provide life-saving care to this one who was “an enemy.”¹

In today's gospel, we learn of a Roman centurion, his slave, some Jewish elders and Jesus. All of these people in the gospel, like in the story of Yitzak and Leopold, could be viewed as potential enemies—yet, as the story unfolds, they all seem to respect one another and work together to bring about healing for the centurion's slave.

For example, take the Roman centurion. He was a man of power and authority. He could do anything he wanted to a slave. Slaves, once they were sick or injured could be abandoned or even killed. From the point of view of the slave, a Roman centurion could be seen as an enemy. Yet this Roman centurion seems to have been a caring and kind person toward his slave. The slave, we're told, was “valued highly, was ill and close to death.” The centurion seems to have treated the slave well, and becomes the slave's advocate by seeking out Jesus to heal him.

So the centurion sends some Jewish elders to Jesus. Most Jews likely viewed the centurion as their enemy, because he was occupying their country, and represented Roman rule over the Jews. The Jews wanted the Romans out of their country. Yet, here Luke tells us these Jewish leaders respected the centurion because he had loved the Jewish people and even had built their synagogue. Now this was quite a gesture of kindness and generosity on the part of that centurion. Instead of being the enemy of the Jews and persecuting their faith by destroying their place of worship; this centurion encourages their faith and builds them a synagogue. The fact that he built them their synagogue also suggests the centurion was a man of means; he must have been relatively wealthy to be able to undertake such a building project. So rather than being an enemy of the Jews, he as an outsider befriends them and supports their faith.

Luke also tells us something instructive here when he says that these Jewish leaders go to Jesus on behalf of the centurion to appeal to him that he might heal the sick, dying slave. For the Jewish leaders to go to Jesus and make this request implies that they were not the enemy of Jesus. Rather, it implies that these Jewish leaders respected Jesus' authority over illness and even death. The gospels often portray the Jewish leaders as the enemy of Jesus. In this story Luke tells us the opposite is true—these Jewish leaders befriend Jesus and seek out his help to heal the sick, dying slave.

In today's world, it would be like a Palestinian Muslim offering to build a Jewish synagogue. Or it would be like a Hindu in India offering to build a Christian church. So one of the important messages in this gospel story is that God is at work through outsiders to do his bidding. God is at work through those who are stereotyped as 'the enemy' to bring about healing. Moreover, just as a slave was the lowest of the low in biblical times; yet in the eyes of the centurion was valued highly; so in our world today God seeks out the lowest of the low and highly values them. Outsiders become insiders when befriending 'the enemy.' 'The enemy' becomes a friend and yes, even a brother or a sister as faith is shared through acts of love, caring and kindness.

What a wonderful story this is! A Roman centurion admits his humility before Jesus, believing that he is not worthy enough for Jesus to come into his house. Yet, he has a faith greater than the Jewish people who are the insiders. A faith that was simple, believing in the power of Jesus' words spoken in the form of a command. Such belief

was based not on his knowledge of the Bible, or the Jewish faith. Rather, his simple faith was based on his experience as a Roman centurion who gave orders to his servant and to the soldiers under him. When he ordered them to “go,” they went; when he ordered them to “come,” they came. On the basis of his own experience and understanding, he makes his request to Jesus to: “only speak the word, and let my servant be healed.” He had a simple faith that if Jesus did as he asked him, his servant would be healed. Jesus honours his request and praises the centurion’s faith. When the centurion’s friends came back to the house: “they found the slave in good health.”

So a simple faith, rooted in love, kindness, and a humble spirit goes a long ways. Befriending outsiders, ‘the enemy’ draws us closer together; for in the eyes of our LORD we are all insiders, we are all brothers and sisters. For that, thanks be to God! Amen.

1 Emphasis online, at: <sermonsuite.com>.