

May 29, 2016



“Compatriots in Faith”

Sermon by Rev. Larry Young

Acts 17:16-28

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, “What does this babbling want to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.” (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’

Luke 7:1-10

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, “He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.” And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it.” When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

On this Memorial Day weekend we pause to remember those who have rendered military service on our behalf. And as we do so, we’re likely to become mindful of how much current and recent military service has come about because of religious conflicts. The current battle against ISIS terrorism and recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have much to do with conflicting understandings within Islam—Sunni and Shia, with all their subgroupings; and many of the differing factions have chosen to fight over their differences rather than confront them peaceably. But historically speaking we know the fighting has not been limited to Islam. Christian history has been littered with instances of doing battle with fellow believers whose beliefs and values differed. Think of the Spanish Inquisition, for example, or the persecution of Mennonite and Amish believers following the Protestant Reformation, or of non-Conformists in Puritan New England. In my own lifetime I can recall hearing vitriolic sermons against Roman Catholics as though they were the great enemy of faith. I’m glad for how much the religious climate has changed over the past 50 years. Yet the tension between religious Insiders and Outsiders is still part of the picture for many of us. As Insiders we want to believe that our faith is true; and if those Outsiders around us hold different beliefs and values, does that mean their faith is deficient in some way? The “culture wars” in our country have exasperated the feeling of many that different life values are reason enough for holding to an antagonistic approach to these Outsiders. And often this is just within the Christian community. What about Islamics and Buddhists and Hindus and Sikhs and Bahais, and for that matter all the non-professing secularists out there, who are part of our community? Are they enemies of God? As people of faith, how should we think of them?

Our reading from Acts today finds Paul facing a very pluralistic religious scene in Athens. The plethora of idols testified to a diversity of religious outlooks. And Paul gets invited to speak to this situation. Now there’s no question that Paul believes the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is the ultimate truth. But what the idols signify to him is that humans are created by God with a built-in hunger to search for God. Each idol represents a different search. So in effect Paul here is honoring the search, even while maintaining their searching is far from complete.

In Luke’s Gospel the Roman centurion who asks Jesus’ help is clearly an Outsider from a Jewish viewpoint. He is a prominent representative of the occupying Roman Empire, and as such he embodies not only the oppression of Jews but also the pagan religious ideology of Rome. The fact that he had built a synagogue for the Jews puts him in a more favorable light with them—but he is still an Outsider. But the centurion is facing a personal crisis: his beloved slave is near death, and the centurion sees in Jesus one with the power to heal him. We don’t know whether the centurion saw Jesus as more than a healer, though the power to heal would seem to point to some more transcendent connection. Now let’s give the centurion credit for being a good strategist: rather than meeting Jesus in person, he sends his request with some Jewish elders who can put in a good word for him. Perhaps he also felt that as a high Roman official he could not be seen meeting with a Jewish teacher. So Jesus proceeds to the centurion’s house. But when he was almost there, the centurion sends another delegation with a further message. “You don’t need to come any farther,” he says. And there are two reasons for this. The first is, “I am not worthy to have you come under my roof.” Was he aware of some great moral failing in his life? That’s a possibility. But it’s also possible he recognized in Jesus a higher spiritual power. And the centurion was asking for a special grace that he knew he did not merit. But moreover, Jesus doesn’t need to come any closer because the centurion believes that Jesus can grant the healing right where he is. “Say the word, and my servant will be healed.” As a man of power, the centurion recognizes power when he sees it. And he sees it in Jesus. And Jesus’ response to this is, “Friends, this is what faith looks like. This foreigner has got it right!” And at once the slave is found to be healed.

Now all this does not make the centurion a card-carrying member of the synagogue; religiously speaking he is still an Outsider. But in Jesus’ eyes he is a faithful Outsider, a compatriot in faith, who stands in a positive relationship with God. When I’ve done membership orientation classes, I have often referred to the church with a small c and the Church with a capital C. The small-c church refers to a concrete, organized body of believers which can be readily located and identified. But Church with a capital C refers to Christ’s worldwide body and includes all those people whose lives show them to be part of Christ’s family, whether they are members of a formal church organization or not. And of course only God knows who they are. Frequently we see signs in others in the actions they take, the values they do or do not uphold, and the things they care about. And we may be sorely tempted to make judgments on the basis of what we observe. In so doing, of course, what we can’t see in others’ lives is missing from the picture. And we never know how skewed our own yardsticks for judging may be.

I believe that how we as Christian individuals view those who differ from us, and how we act on our viewing, is one of the most weighty issues facing us today as people of faith. There are two reasons why that's so. One is that when we get caught up being antagonistic toward our perceived Outsiders, we betray the spirit of love that's at the heart of our faith. Love is about relating to others as worthy fellow children of God. It's about working to bridge our differences and finding ways to live together in peace and mutual caring. When secularists and atheists blame religion for being the cause of so much war and divisiveness in the world, the onus is on us to be sure we're not a part of the problem, and so discrediting our faith in the process. And second, in a time when antagonism and conflict are so rife in the public arena, it's all the more important that we who hold a belief in peacemaking and bridging differences will do our part to make this a more harmonious world. Surely God is calling us to make a difference at such a time as this.

Clearly how we relate to Islam is one of our greatest challenges today. So much conflict and threat to world harmony is found in Islamic countries. And now the ISIS movement is waging an even broader war that is causing us in the West to feel threatened. And all this is being carried on in the name of Islam as a kind of religious crusade. Now we're sophisticated enough to know that Islam lends itself to varied and diverse interpretations. Some of you in this congregation have been part of the meetings with our Islamic neighbors here in Santa Monica, and you know that their brand of Islam is not a threat but a faith that we have much in common with. But humanly-speaking we know we can get so weary and frightened by all the news of Islamic-related violence that we may be tempted to say, a pox on the whole religion! So we fail to maintain the distinction between Islam as a faith and its distorted interpreters—and we may support our political leaders in not making this distinction. And not surprisingly the result is increased animosity toward us on the part of many Islamic people.

The challenge for us as Christians is not to agree with or even to value the faith and teachings of Islam as a whole. But it is to respect Islam as the way millions of our fellow humans find their relation to God—and to be open to the possibility that the God we know may be at work in that faith also.

There seem to be no lack of other issues with the potential to divide us. But clearly one of them revolves around the hot-button social issues of our time, and notably sexual orientation at this moment. The news media report almost daily on the battles going on in the political arena; and the meeting of our United Methodist General Conference earlier this month made us painfully aware once again of the divisiveness over this issue in the church. Whatever side of the issue we take, we tend to feel passionately about it; and too often that leads us to regard those on the other side as enemies. In the political arena we see how this only adds to today's polarizing mindset. And in the church this divisiveness hinders our mission of bearing witness to Christ's redemptive love. We need to bear in mind that those we disagree with may well be compatriots in faith with us—even with some different convictions that seem misguided to us. Since the death of Supreme Court justice Scalia, the story has surfaced about his close friendship with justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg—despite their being such polar opposites in legal philosophy and each being so passionate about their respective beliefs. Particularly as Christians, can't we also rise above our differences to embrace one another as compatriots, even as we hold to our own convictions?

I believe the centurion in today's Gospel reading offers us another important insight we'd do well to keep in mind. "I am not worthy to have you come under my roof," he relayed to Jesus. In this age of self-affirmation that idea may seem out of sync. We very much want to think of ourselves as worthy disciples, as "good people" who merit God's grace. But the truth is we are never good enough or righteous enough to earn what God gives us. Grace comes to us because of God's love, not because of any heavenly bonuses we've earned. Holding to this spirit of humility may serve to keep us from over-valuing our own ideas when they differ from others. And it may help us to remember that God's grace is given to all of us, whatever our opinions. It is grace that makes us compatriots in faith, grace that hopefully shapes us into disciples who care about one another's well-being, who work to bridge difference and live in peace and love. On this Memorial Day weekend, my hope is that we will be a people of peace who make war less a reality in our world. Amen.