

DOING DEALS

May 29, 2016

I Kings 18: 20-21, 30-40

Psalm 96

Galatians 1: 1-12

Luke 7: 1-10

During all this time since the last church service, there has been a lot of talk and a lot of activity in our communities, in our country and around the world about what we must do to stay together and, at the same time, what we must do to protect ourselves from one another. There's talk about building walls and crossing borders and staying together and pulling apart and what kinds of lives matter. Here we are in the Beaverkill *Community* Church and yet if we look around at what has been happening and what has been talked about, we might wonder about what that word really means. Is it a physical or an emotional reference, or both?

So, particularly because of this, I want to focus today upon the passage from Luke that we just read. The story appears to be a description of faithfulness and of political activity in the small town of Capernaum. No sooner has Jesus entered the town than he is approached by some leaders in the Jewish community there and urged to heal the the dying slave of a Roman officer, or centurion.

The centurion has been very good to the local Jewish community, the elders tell Jesus, and has even had their synagogue built for them, this despite the fact that he is a gentile. In the story that we read today, Jesus is on the way to the centurion's, or officer's house, to perform the healing, when he is intercepted by friends of the centurion who tell him not to come to an unworthy house but only send the message of healing. Jesus should

not be bothered any more than that, says the centurion, for he knows that Jesus has the ear of God. Jesus is amazed at the faith that this request demonstrates and he heals the slave from afar. The message of the story is most often seen as the faith of the centurion, despite his outsider status.

In the story from 1 Kings, just to spend a little time with that, Elijah got the people to follow the God of Abraham and Isaac and Israel, by watching something of a miracle, instead of following the multiple gods of Baal. But that was a division that could not or would not be bridged, and the prophets of Baal were slaughtered, rather than made objects of diplomatic efforts.

Back in Capernaum, many centuries later, there seems to be a much more civilized process at work, at least for the moment. Mostly this story seems to be used as an example of the breadth of faith, of how it can waft from the mind and heart of one to the body and soul of the other who needs it without requiring flesh touching flesh. It is the manifestation of prayer.

But it is also an illustration of empathy. Of empathy that is in opposition to what occurred in 1 Kings and to what seems to be occurring in much of the world around us right now. For this is the centurion saying to Jesus, that he understands that he and his household would contaminate Jesus and his followers, and also that he, the centurion, understands what his, Jesus, life is like. "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." So the centurion sounds almost like one business man talking to another, trying to close a deal. "I get it, I know who you are, you and I can work together, we have

the same needs, the same goals,” and so forth. Yes, we have these rules, and you have those rules, but we did build your synagogue and you can cure my slave. (We will have to talk about this slavery thing in another message, I think.) So the centurion is saying that there are ways that we can talk to each other and that we should talk to each other, and he is not the only one saying it. Jesus is saying it and the Jewish elders are saying it too. They are saying that despite their differences, differences that they point to and acknowledge, they can communicate with one another, work with one another, build community with one another, save lives with one another.

This puts me in mind of friend's story of doing business with Arabic clients for whom anything having to do with interest was out of the question as being usurious and therefore evil. So he found a way to structure investments according to sharia law, including real estate deals, which would not include anything that would be thought of as interest bearing or usurious. Now we may think of this as just dressing up the pig, so to speak, but it means that everyone can talk together, can work together, can respect one another's customs without crossing a line. The traditions that are important to one group of people can still be observed, but communication can continue and joint goals can be achieved.

How different is this from the story in 1 Kings in which Elijah is trying to show the people how much better the one Lord of Abraham is than is Baal, Baal who has numerous prophets? Once the prophets of Baal had been humiliated when their lord does not show up when summoned, and they go about crying aloud and cutting themselves, then Elijah, after showing the

marvels of the fire burning Lord of Israel and Abraham, turned and killed all the prophets of Baal, just before the long sought rain began to fall. What violence and hysteria in comparison to the negotiation that went on in Capernaum! This is a much more primitive story, of course, and occurs many centuries earlier.

But what is going on right now in the Middle East and Africa with consequences in other parts of the world is not dissimilar. And the violence that is manifesting in our own country, though not of the same measure, is surely horrendous. The violence that we all hear about on television and radio and in the papers, is that occurs when one aspect of religious belief cannot tolerate another, cannot tolerate it to the point where its believers and its monuments must be destroyed; or when the freedom allowed to those of another skin color is seen as abhorrent to the point where they must be oppressed or destroyed; or it may be so with gender or sexual preference as well.

What is missing in all of these situations is what went on between Jesus and the centurion and the elders. What is missing is the willingness and ability to smooth any waters, to build any bridges, to speak without sparks flying. Jesus and the elders and the centurion seemed to realize that they needed one another. The fact that they recognized that need must be something that is key to diplomacy.

Alan Gopnik writes about this in a recent article in the *New Yorker* when he says, “the changes we work for will never be universally accepted, and the test of our politics is extending sympathy to those who seem to stand in our

way. Change requires more than just speaking out,' President Obama said, at a graduation speech at Howard: 'It requires listening to those with whom you disagree, and being prepared to compromise... The point is that you need allies in a democracy. That's just the way it is. It can be frustrating and it can be slow. But history teaches us that the alternative to democracy is always worse.' And Gopnik goes on to say that "Obama's liberalism is not therapeutic. You don't listen to others to make them feel better. You listen because without their cooperation, or at least their tacit acceptance of the moral urgency of change, that long arc won't bend and progress won't happen."

And that is the lesson for today, my dear friends, here at our Community Church of Beaverkill. It is to respect differences and hold out hands, whatever our traditions may be.

let us pray

What do the unclean rules accomplish? Talk about the usury story with David's friend? Relationship with slave.

Conclusion:

Can achieve ends of care taking, love, etc. as well as discipline in new ways. Care for those for whom we have responsibility in the best way possible. Using convention, i.e. "unclean", even if it seems to work against our goals