

Second Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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As a major news event unfolds there is one type of story that almost always seems to pop up. It happened with Brussels' terror attack and the Paris' terror attack. It happened with the recent EgyptAir flight's crash. It has happened with the Zika virus and the idea of a contested convention. It's the infamous story entitled "what we know and don't know about (fill in the blank)." It's an article that attempts to articulate where things are in an investigation. We get a list of things discovered, and a list of questions investigators pursue. Generally, we feel most comfortable waiting to draw a firm conclusion until most of the facts are compiled. However, what happens when we are presented with a story with outstanding questions and no potential for answers? How do we draw our conclusions?

Today's reading from Luke is a prime example. Here's what we don't know: We don't know how this Roman centurion heard about Jesus. We don't know anything about his military career. We don't know why he changed his mind about Jesus coming to heal his slave into a request to speak a word of healing. We don't know why he really valued this slave. We don't know if the slave was Jewish. We don't know what happened to the

slave or the centurion after this healing. There is so much we don't know.¹ So what do we do?

We could sit here all day and I could guess. We could postulate that the centurion really loved the slave. We could also assume that he only cares about the loss of property – after all, that's what a slave was, property. We could talk about how the centurion maybe didn't want Jesus in the house because it would mean ritual defilement for Jesus as a Jew by entering a Gentile's home, or we could assume that the centurion respected the authority given to Jesus over all things thus encouraging Jesus to use a simple word. We could assume, but, then again, we know what assuming does. So instead of assuming, instead of guessing, instead of getting caught up in what we don't know; we turn to what we *do* know? We use what we do know to figure out what in the world this story is about.

One main thing we know from the story is that Jesus “marveled” at the centurion. This word “marveled” is translated from the greek work *thaumazo* (pronounced: thou-mad'-zo), and it also means “to be had in admiration.”² We see this word 13 other times in Luke, which is more than any other gospel. Often *thaumazo* is used to express the mighty deeds of God. This, however, is the *only* time that Jesus marveled, which makes this a big deal!

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/05/pentecost-2-c-welcoming-difference/>

² <http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/thaumazo.html>

To further emphasize this big deal, Jesus “turned” to the crowd to speak to them. A half of a dozen times in Luke Jesus “turns.” It’s not just like a basketball style pivot. Jesus “turns” and each time he makes a special pronouncement. As we continue reading Luke this summer, we’ll want to look at the word “turns” as a keyword. It’s like a teacher saying, “This question is going to be on the test!”, and we know how that gets students scribbling down the question and answer with great detail. So too Jesus gives the answer to his marveling in saying, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.”³

So, wait, why was Jesus amazed? Was it because of the centurion’s *faith* (the fact that he merely had faith)? Was it because it was a *Roman centurion* who had faith (the fact that a Roman centurion, gentile had faith)? Again, we don’t actually know. As theologian David Lose puts it, what “we do know is that Jesus does not ask him to become his follower, or to take up his cross, or to deny himself, or to keep silent, or to share the good news, or any of the other things Jesus often does in similar situation. He only speaks the word of healing while also being amazed at the centurion’s faith.” Here we find that Jesus encounters someone so utterly different yet who still displays faith. Yet, Jesus doesn’t ask him to convert, or to change, or to follow, he simply heals and commends. I think that sets this story apart from so many others we find in Luke.⁴

³ http://www.progressiveinvolvement.com/progressive_involvement/2013/05/lectionary-blogging-pentecost-2-luke-7-1-10.html

⁴ <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/05/pentecost-2-c-welcoming-difference/>

With this in mind, one theologian asks, “I wonder how many other people who are not followers of Jesus God is using right now? I wonder how many people of other faiths we might be amazed about if we stopped to notice the good they are doing? I wonder how many people of different faith or no faith we might see differently if we kept this story in mind? Here’s the thing,” he says, “God loves everyone. God works through everyone. God has hopes and dreams for everyone. And we may be surprised who God chooses, who God works through, and who God commends.... When the political rhetoric of the day is so charged with fear of those who are different- from a different country, professing a different faith, living in a different neighborhood, looking different from us, having different needs or hopes. To God, there is no ‘other,’ there are only beloved children.” A colleague of mine, Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, is fond of saying that “whenever we draw a line between who’s in and who’s out, we’ll find Jesus on the other side.”⁵

⁵ <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/05/pentecost-2-c-welcoming-difference/>

We know that we do a lot of line drawing in a world. We draw a line between American-born people and immigrants, even though Jesus was an immigrant and refugee. We draw a line between those with the privileged skin color and those without that privilege, only to remember that Jesus' people were both occupied and oppressed with their dark skin. We draw a line between church leaders and church participants, only to remember that Jesus was not a Jewish religious leader. We draw a line between Christians and those with a different faith or no faith at all, and then today we remember that Jesus is found admiring the faith of an outsider. We draw lines here, lines there, and a few lines everywhere only to find that we've drawn our God right outside of our own box. It's something hard to hear, but it's true. We all draw lines and separate ourselves from others.

Today we're going to try something a bit different. Instead of me taking from you the opportunity to explore your own lines, I want to give some space for you to do this work yourself. If you're new here today, know that I don't usually do this so were all in an awkward space together. In your bulletin is a piece of paper. Take it out and use a pew pen to draw a line in the center. Then write at least one, but maybe more, examples of whom we try to separate out. Put one group of people on one side and one on the other. Maybe it'll be right-handed people on the top and left handed-people on the bottom. Take a few moments to brainstorm.

(While people are brainstorming a giant piece of painter's tape is being run down the center aisle.)

Here we have a giant line separating the baptismal font side from the organ side. On your paper, what kind of things did you put on the different sides of the line? Does anyone want to share? (Men and women; employed and unemployed; queer and straight)

There are so many ways we draw lines between us and them. So what do we do about all the lines that are drawn in the world? How do we break down these lines? I don't have all the answers, but I do have some suggestions. First, we must acknowledge that our God always comes down to us. In Caroline's baptism we remember that God's love comes not as a result of doing something, but rather as a pure gift. So we look to the baptismal waters and we see lines dissolving in the water, (Pastor Jason begins ripping pieces of the tape apart making a dotted line on the floor) for we are all God's children - all are God's children - not just all Lutherans, not just all Christians, but we are all God's children. Jesus reminds us today that we are all filled with the potential to love and serve.

Second, we see Jesus bringing together all people today. So too we respond to God's love knowing that there are forces that separate us from God's unity. In the baptismal liturgy we renounced the forces that oppose God's will. We renounced our participation with the powers. To take that really seriously we each have the hard work of owning that we are a bunch of linear, line-drawing people. We have to "own" our lines. For we cannot begin to break down the lines until we own the lines we draw. And when we begin to break down these lines piece-by-piece it becomes a dotted line where we slowly see movement between the two groups. Where we can begin to see the other. Where we can begin to be astonished and amazed by what we know.

My friends, that's the message of all of today's readings: God sees no outsiders. God draws no lines. Period. Today you are set free; you're freed to break down the lines that separate all of creation. Get out there turn those solid lines into dotted lines of grace. Amen.