

Lectionary 9 2016
The Rev. Donna M. Wright
Kellers Church/Perkasie
May 29, 2016

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I didn't cry after the attacks on 9/11. I was in shock. I was angry. I felt a grim appreciation for the planning and logistics involved in coordinating the attacks. But I didn't cry. Not even at the prayer service I led at my congregation that night. I didn't cry until three days later. When I watched the memorial worship service on television. Not the one at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. I cried at the memorial service held at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, England. The familiar, traditional liturgy (which the British always do so well!) was healing. But seeing the deep grief of the British people unlocked my emotions. When a foreigner, a stranger, shares our deepest values, our deepest concerns – it is a special validation of those concerns, those passions.

When wise King Solomon dedicated the costly temple in Jerusalem, he prayed to the Lord God. His first sentence was praise for God. In his second sentence of dedication, Solomon prayed to the Lord God to respond to the prayers of foreigners. For the recognition of a foreigner showed that the Lord God was great not only to the people Israel, but to other people, other nations. And Solomon wanted the Lord to grant the prayer of any and all foreigners, so they would be even more convinced of the greatness of Solomon's God.

In Luke's gospel a foreigner heard about Jesus, his healings, his words. A Roman centurion. A foreign soldier, in Israel for Caesar's purposes, to accomplish Caesar's will. But this foreigner had made a good impression upon the Jews he had encountered, as he was doing Caesar's will. The foreigner wanted his slave healed. So he appealed to Jesus, first through the Jewish elders, then through his own friends. The Roman centurion did not feel worthy to come to Jesus himself, or to have Jesus come into his house. But he trusted that Jesus could heal his servant even if he were outside the house. Like Caesar trusted the centurion to do what Caesar commanded, even though the centurion was not in the same room with Caesar. The order from Caesar was enough. The centurion recognized that whatever divine healing powers existed, would do as Jesus directed. For Jesus' authority over such powers was clear – at least to him.

When Jesus heard how the centurion recognized his authority, even Jesus was amazed and said, "Not even in Israel have I found such faith." It was the faith of the foreigner that made the difference to Jesus. Not his good deeds. Not his humility. It was his faith that Jesus had power to do great things – and his faith that Jesus *would* do so – that called out Jesus' response of amazement.

Faith is a deep and abiding mystery. What we have faith in, what we trust – it is hard to explain how that comes about. We don't know how the centurion came to such deep faith in Jesus. Many reports from witnesses known to be reliable – probably a good start. A change in behavior and character, in those who had encountered Jesus in person probably had an effect. But for a foreigner to have such faith in a Jewish healer from a small town? St. Paul noted that even faith is a gift from God. Perhaps so with that centurion.

Almost 2,000 years after the events that Luke recorded in his gospel, we still marvel at the gift of faith. The faith given to the centurion. The faith given to Paul, who started out persecuting Christians – then, after a revelation of Jesus, became a most fervent Christian. We marvel at the gift of faith that has kept the Christian Church (the Jesus movement) going for 2 millennia. To foreigner, after foreigner, centurions and Galatians, Germans and Lenapes, Liberians and Filipinos. I am humbled at the gift of faith represented by this building and this ministry of Kellers Church, in this part of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, that has been

recognizing the authority and power of Jesus Christ for 265 years. The people who have worshipped here have sought to follow the will of Jesus the Christ; have made Jesus' mission their mission. Our mission.

What we have faith in is the good news brought by Jesus the Christ – that God has chosen to love us without us having to do anything to earn that love. We don't have to be worthy. We don't have to be humble. We don't even have to recognize the authority of God. (Although I have observed that life is much easier when I *do* acknowledge the authority of God.) Our God is love. Love for the foreigner, the stranger. Our God is giver. Giver of all good things, including forgiveness – healing us from our sins, which no physician can cure – only God can cure sin-sickness. For that we thank God! And for that we pray, that our witness, the light that shines forth from this place, will be so moving that even strangers praise our God. Amen