

Homily Pentecost 2C
May 29, 2016
Grace, River Forest

1 Kings 8:22-23, 41-43
Psalm 96
Galatians 1:1-12
Luke 7:1-10

Dealing with Foreigners

In Jesus' name. Amen

King Solomon is dedicating a new temple to the Lord. It is the house of God that his dad, David, hoped to build. But the Lord said, "No, David. I appreciate the thought. But this new temple in which my glory will dwell will not be built by you, but by your son, Solomon."

The dedication begins with praise by King Solomon, "O Lord, there is no God like you,...keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants." (1 Kings 8:23) Solomon then prays a variety of petitions for the people of Israel – not included in our text today. And then, remarkably, Solomon prays for foreigners, strangers, immigrants, who, he says, "come from a distant land," attracted by the Lord's mighty deeds, by "your great name, your mighty hand and your outstretched arm." Solomon pleads, "When a foreigner comes and prays, [O Lord], then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner" asks of you. To what end, for what purpose, should God hear and grant

foreigners' requests? "So that," Solomon says, "all the peoples of the earth may know your name, [O God]."

I have a question. What draws, attracts, "foreigners," people from other lands, to our country today? The same thing that Solomon says drew "foreigners" to Israel – because they have heard of God's "great name," God's mighty deeds, God's deliverance of God's people? Well, mostly not. I think immigrants have from time immemorial come to the U.S. seeking a better life, relief from famine or persecution, or from the ravages of war. But I'd like to believe that immigrants can see something of God's love and compassion in the action of Christians here. Like those Christians at the end of World War II who under the Marshall Plan sent Care Packages of clothes and food to former enemies and other displaced persons in Germany, and then helped many of those "displaced" resettle in the U.S. And like those Christians who are helping resettle Syrian and other refugees in our country today. Ascension Lutheran Church in Riverside – about fourth the size of Grace – has – on its own and in partnership with other churches – resettled several refugee families. I think we here at Grace could do that, too. To what end, for what purpose? Not that people might convert wholesale to Christianity but so that "all the peoples of the earth might know God's name" and God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I do know individuals whose desire to learn more about the Christian faith was part of their motivation for coming to the U.S. Like Lingchen, a student from China, who came to the U.S. to study, but also came because he was attracted to Christianity. The first Sunday Lingchen came to church here – he came with Grace members, the Todds, with whom he was living at the time – Lingchen said he would like to be baptized. And so he was, at the Easter Vigil here, after several weeks of instruction by Pastor Lyle. And last Sunday, Lingchen was one of the new members who joined Grace church.

At a minimum, what we as Christians could do, is to follow King Solomon's example: and pray for all foreigners, newcomers, immigrants, documented or undocumented, in our land, and for refugees who wait an average of 17 years in a refugee camp before they find a country to take them in. We celebrated our graduating high school students last Sunday. If they had been born in a refugee camp, they would surely not be going on to college this fall. We saw photos again last week of a severely overcrowded boat filled with refugees capsizing in the Mediterranean. We might wonder why parents would risk such a trip with their children, but I read a quote in *Christian Century* magazine this week that explains why: "No one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land." (Poet Warsan Shire, *New York Times*, May 2, 2016, *Christian Century* May 25,

2016, p. 9) Can we pray for refugees that God might grant the desires of their heart, safety for their families and a new start? And perhaps even help make that possible for them?

In today's Gospel, in Luke, we meet a foreigner. He is a Roman centurion, stationed in Capernaum. And the desires of his heart are abundantly clear: he has heard about Jesus and hopes that Jesus can heal his slave, his servant, who is "close to death." Twice the centurion sends intermediaries to Jesus, and from those intermediaries we learn quite a bit about this foreigner. First, Jewish elders testify of the worthiness of this man: "he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." Jesus heads off with the elders to the centurion's house. When Jesus is getting near, the centurion sends friends to him, to say, "Lord, do not trouble yourself any more, for I'm not worthy of having you come to my house....But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed." Perhaps the Roman soldier wanted to keep Jesus from becoming ritually unclean – which he would have been by Jewish law, entering a Gentile's home. But there is more to it than that. The centurion – a man of authority and under authority – humbly recognizes Jesus' authority. He calls Jesus "Lord." Jesus tells the crowd following him, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." And the centurion's

friends, when they return to his house, find the servant up and around, “in good health.”

So what does this story of the centurion possibly have to do with us today? A lot, actually. In fact, many suggest that this stranger, this “foreigner,” is a role model for us. How so?

Well, for one thing, we, like the centurion, are “foreigners,” Gentiles, outsiders, grafted by faith in Christ into God’s people. And like us today, the centurion never actually comes in contact with Jesus, never meets Jesus in person, face-to-face. But he believes in the power of Jesus’ word, even at a distance – to heal and to save his servant, whom he valued and loved so much, from death. We, too, separated from Jesus by time and language and country, have never come into direct contact with Jesus, never seen him in the flesh, face-to-face. Yet, like the centurion, we trust in the power of Christ’s word and work these centuries later, to still be at work today – in his death and resurrection, in the water of baptism and in his holy supper – to bring us healing and forgiveness, to save us from captivity to sin and death, and give us everlasting life. And Jesus’ powerful word of love for us does even more: it opens our hearts, when they are squeezed shut by fear and suspicion, and transforms us into welcoming and hospitable people.

In the prayer of the day, we plead “revive our faith, heal our bodies, and mend our communities.” In various ways, our bodies and minds and spirits, and our communities and nation, need healing and mending. One of those ways we need healing and mending is in our attitude toward foreigners, strangers, immigrants, outsiders. For Jesus said in Matthew 25, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” We have an opportunity to welcome Jesus, the stranger, again today.

In Jesus’ name. Amen

