

Luke 7:1-10
May 29, 2016

“Faithful Outsiders”

Rev. William Utke
Emanuel UCC, HC

It happened in Kansas City, Mo. Began at a QuikTrip convenience store. Annette Vaughn, who admitted she often complained to her husband about their junky car, noticed someone else in need. Her complaining stopped when she saw a young soldier at the convenience store, working under the hood of his car.

Annette thought, “gosh, if I was rich I'd buy that guy a new car. But, I am not rich.” Yet something stirred within her and she felt God leading her to take action.

She did not know the man, had not even seen his face, but she snapped a picture of him. Wanting to keep it as a reminder that she did not have it so bad... She didn't plan to do anything with the picture. But later she began a quest on her Facebook page to help the veteran.

"Would anybody be willing to go in with me, see if we can get a couple of people together and raise some money to help this guy with car repairs or buy gas cards or something," she posted on Facebook. Within a couple hours she had 50 people respond and money raised.

But there was a problem; Annette didn't know who the soldier was. "If God is in this, God is going to lead us to this person," Annette said. Her husband Ryan went back to the convenience store to ask for help from the employees. The managers said they would look out for the young soldier driving a beat-up white car. They told their friends on social media and then their friends told their friends. Within two days, someone spotted the beat-up white car turning into an apartment complex.

All their hard work paid off and they found Eythan Watts. Watts is a specialist in the Army National Guard. He drives to Lexington, MO 120 miles round trip each day for duty and goes to community college at night. Eythan responded, "I was a little weirded out at first. I was like... somebody is taking a picture of me at QuikTrip." The Facebook post generated \$5,000. While the veteran was apprehensive at first, Eythan finally took the gift. Annette and her husband set up a GoFundMe page for the young soldier and his girlfriend who's also enlisted in the U.S. Army.

Today in Luke's Gospel we encounter Jesus who has been working hard all day, telling people to, “Trust God and believe God loves and cares for you.” All the people listening to him were Jewish. Throwing in a twist Jesus tells the crowd a story about a Faithful outsider. A Roman centurion who asks some Jewish leaders to approach Jesus on behalf of his sick servant.

Many in the crowd were eager to let out a cheer as they expected to hear Jesus turn the Centurion down. A Roman soldier was a most unlikely person to amaze Jesus. He was gentile. He was Roman, stationed in Palestine to subject the Jews to the Emperor's rule. He was a man of war. This is not the kind of person we expect to impress Jesus.

But in the encounter, Jesus did not look on the outside of the centurion, he looked on the soldier's heart. Jesus experiences deep faith in the centurion, faith that moves him to challenge his Jewish brothers and sisters saying, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." So what was the faith of the Roman Soldier that was so convincing to Jesus?

Was it that this outsider was able to trust that Jesus could heal his servant with a word? Was it that this outsider demonstrated serious humility in Jesus' presence? We can't be sure, but we can see that Jesus was convinced.

There is always a fear in our world, we see it playing out in social and political issues during this election year. The fear is that we become too territorial. We circle the wagons and try to protect our own against anyone who is different from us. Diversity becomes something to be feared, instead of celebrated.

Some of you noticed on the Church Facebook page this week, I had the great honor and privilege of attending the naturalization ceremony of our Church member Julio Alphonso. Our congregation has been with Julio and Theresa through a long journey which led to this past Thursday morning at the Federal Courthouse in Downtown Milwaukee, where Julio became a full naturalized citizen of the United States. The federal judge who presided over the ceremony, The honorable David Jones said, "today, all 66 of you, become a part of we, "We the people."

That's right, Thursday morning about 9:30am, after waiting for nearly two hours, Judge David Jones and a packed courtroom welcomed 66 new US citizens. These 66 citizens came from 31 countries, from every continent except Antarctica. If you haven't attended one of these ceremonies, I highly recommend you do.

Judge Jones did a tremendous job. Before he gave the new citizens the oath he spoke about the importance of this day and the positive influence Immigrants have had on this country.

On this Sunday when the gospel story calls us to consider the gifts and faith of outsiders, I share the thoughts of a US federal judge, the honorable David Jones, "Without our naturalized citizens the United States would not be three quarters the country we are. While today you will renounce your allegiance to your former country... We in the US hope each of you will bring your unique heritage, your food, your traditions, your customs, and your culture to share so all of us may become better." He continued, "While the common image of immigration has been of a 'melting pot,' that makes each of us the same color. I prefer the image of good vegetable soup. Where we are all in there together; carrots, potatoes, green beans, corn, and sorry, yes even broccoli. Giving taste and flavor to each other, but maintaining our own identity and making the soup better.

As new citizens I want to encourage you to exercise your civic duty, the best way you can help keep the United States strong is to become an informed voter and vote. The league of women voters is here to help you get registered right after we give you the oath."

He added, "I recall how this city of Milwaukee is a city of immigrants. One of our founders, Solomon Juneau was a naturalized French Canadian citizen. Margaret Thatcher is credited as saying, "Europe was created by history. America was created by philosophy." A nation guided by Philosophy will not be one which looks backward, but will always be asking how our country can be better.

He closed, "It was the flood of immigrants in the 19th century that saved this country in the 20th century. So if history is any guide, you'll all do great things. America will be better with you. Welcome home."

I think that is Jesus' challenge to us today, it is why he is willing to offend his own people, the very people he loves and cares about with a story about the faith of a Roman soldier, because he wants us to understand, as we heard in our children's story, In God we are one."

Happy Memorial Day weekend!

Amen