



Whose God?

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Luke 7:1-10 (1 Kings 18 – Elijah at Mt. Carmel)

The Second Sunday after Pentecost

May 29, 2016

In Preparation for Worship

“The medicine is there, the healing is there—if only we take a small step toward God; or even just the desire to take that step.” Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 2016

Opening Sentences of Scripture

⁷Will the Lord be pleased with [sacrifices of] thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” ⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:7-8

Scripture: Luke 7:1-10

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ²A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. ³When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. ⁴When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, “He is worthy of having you do this for him, ⁵for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.” ⁶And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; ⁷therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸For 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.” ⁹When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” ¹⁰When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

For Reference: 1 Kings 18:20-39

²⁰So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel.

²¹Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.” The people did not answer him a word. ²²Then Elijah said to the people, “I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord; but Baal’s prophets number four hundred fifty. ²³Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. ²⁴Then you call on the name of your god and I

Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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will call on the name of the Lord; the god who answers by fire is indeed God.” All the people answered, “Well spoken!” ²⁵Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it.” ²⁶So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, “O Baal, answer us!” But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made. ²⁷At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, “Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.” ²⁸Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. ²⁹As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response. ³⁰Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come closer to me”; and all the people came closer to him. First he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down; ³¹Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, “Israel shall be your name”; ³²with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. Then he made a trench around the altar, large enough to contain two measures of seed. ³³Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said, “Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood.” ³⁴Then he said, “Do it a second time”; and they did it a second time. Again he said, “Do it a third time”; and they did it a third time, ³⁵so that the water ran all around the altar, and filled the trench also with water. ³⁶At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. ³⁷Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.” ³⁸Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. ³⁹When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.”

At the root of doing justice is mercy. And mercy is first of all about kindness. And that is how we walk humbly with God.

Pope Francis says: “The medicine is there, the healing is there—if only we take a small step toward God; or even just the desire to take that step.” The pope also says, “The name of God is Mercy.” That is the title of his book published a few months ago. I first heard this statement when Heather brought it to our staff devotions last month. That line has stuck with me since then. *The name of God is Mercy.*¹

¹ Pope Francis, *The Name of God Is Mercy: A Conversation with Andrea Toornielli*, Kindle Edition (New York: Random House, 2016), location 134 of 1275.

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Safwat Marzouk, who is a professor of Old Testament at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, in a reflection about interfaith dialogue in the magazine *The Christian Century*, says that interreligious dialogues are enriched when all parties “open their hands, hearts, and minds to receive the gift of the other for who the other is, finding ways to serve one another and with another.”²

I want to use these two statements to frame our reflection this morning. Together they lift up the texts that help us address the challenge, according to Marzouk, of “how to be grounded in our own faith while showing love and respect for others.”³ The answer, I think, is mercy.

In between those two thoughts are the stories in the ecumenical lectionary for this, the Second Sunday after Pentecost – the story of Elijah at Mt. Carmel and the story of the Roman Centurion’s faith. This is the liturgical season of Pentecost, the season of the Spirit; and this is the longest liturgical season, which lasts until we begin the year again with Advent at the end of November. This is the time of teaching how we should live, a time of discerning how we live in the Spirit of God. The readings today ask the questions Who is God? and Whose God is it?

I think the answer to those questions is, as the pope suggests, *Mercy*—the definition of which includes: “compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one’s power to punish or harm.”⁴

This story in Luke 7 is about seeing the goodness in the other—it is clearly about mercy. A Roman leader, symbol of conquest—certainly with the power to punish or harm—and the Jewish elders, who express appreciation for the Roman’s building their synagogue, work together to bring healing for a person—

a slave, without a voice, without freedom, whose value in that society was only about money—who is, nevertheless, “highly valued.” It is almost as if this miracle story is not about the miracle and hardly about Jesus at all: Jesus simply recognizes the faith of the Roman and the mercy—the compassion—of them all.

The story shows divided people overcoming barriers in order to attend to human need. It is a great model for how we live in a complex world, with much that is negative all around us. It shows what happens, as Marzouk says, when all parties “open their hands, hearts, and minds to receive the gift of the other for who the other is, finding ways to serve one another and with another.”

² Safwat Marzouk, “Reflections on the Lectionary,” *The Christian Century*, May 11, 2016, 23.

³ Marzouk, 23.

⁴ Google search: “mercy.”

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The text from the Hebrew scriptures, however, is much more difficult and even confusing. This text is closer to how we usually act when we are confronted with “the other,” especially in the interfaith arena, especially in our own national context where we live in fear of terrorism in the name of religion—both “ours” and “theirs”; and where even a Memorial Holiday results in arguments about war and peace. *Our* style is much more of an “either/or”—all or nothing. That’s clearly what we see in 1 Kings 18.

I’m going to summarize the Old Testament lectionary passage rather than to read it, partly because it is so long, partly because it is so disturbing, and partly because the details of the story are less important than the point that it makes: The Lord, YHWH, is the God of Israel. I do encourage you to read the whole chapter—and the several chapters before and after—to get a feel for the entire Elijah story.

This is ninth-century Israel; Ahab is king and Jezebel is queen—she is also a priestess of Ba’al...the name of several of the Phoenician gods. The three-year drought and famine have been severe and the people have suffered greatly. Now Elijah is told that God is going to send rain upon the earth. He is told to challenge the prophets of Ba’al, some 450 of them, to a contest at an altar on Mt. Carmel overlooking the Mediterranean Sea to see which deity will send fire to burn the sacrifice. The story is graphic and violent, but in the end God sends fire that consumes the whole altar—the offering, the stones, the water they poured on it. And the Israelites proclaim: “The Lord, He is God.” Elijah announces the end to the long drought; the clouds gather; the storm comes and then it rains heavily. But after *that* miracle, the people react by killing all the prophets of Ba’al—they reject and get rid of “the other.”

This is another of many Old Testament stories that tell how it is that God becomes the God whom Israel worships. Many of them are violent, but they reflect the culture of those times. The details of the story really are less important than the timeless story of how the people witness to God as the one who is showing mercy—here through bringing rain to the land. Regardless of all the confusing details, this is important and clear: It is God, YHWH, whom Elijah serves; it is YHWH who is confessed as the God of Israel; it is God who shows mercy to the people.

But in this story, the people accept God’s mercy of the rain even while they take on authority and control, and react with vengeance at the expense of the other—killing the prophets of Ba’al. For them, it was either/or—no gray area here, no room to learn from the other.

In contrast, the Luke story puts authority in the perspective of service—as Marzouk says, “of finding ways to serve one another and with one another.” The Romans may have conquered Israel, and were in charge of the cities like Capernaum, but this commander used his position of power to honor the Jewish religion and to serve the residents by building their synagogue. And, it would appear, he was willing, and even eager, to learn about the people with whom he lived while he was so far away from his home on military duty. He even respected the separation rules of the

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Jews. He asked the elders and his friends to represent him to Jesus, rather than forcing them all, including Jesus, to come into his house, which would have made them ritually “unclean.”

Then the Jewish elders say that the Roman deserves to be granted his request – a statement that is astonishing, given the disparaging attitude that the Jews of that time had for the Romans. And *everyone* looked past the inequity of slavery and ignored social status to focus on the healing of the slave who was ill. The miracle of kindness here may be more powerful than the miracle of healing.

This story is told to encourage us to *listen to the other* rather than to isolate ourselves or reject people as a way of dealing with differences, inequity, dislike, and all the other things that make us ordinarily stay away from the one who is not like us. That is the message of the gospel, the message of Easter, of new life, and mercy, and community—not rejection and isolation. And surely, that is the message of Pentecost.

Jesus’ recognition of the faith of the centurion is a reminder to us that God’s presence is bigger than our own experience and that God’s Spirit lives in many places beyond our own hearts. “*Listen*” to the Roman commander; “*hear*” his faith by watching his behavior. Remember that Jesus’ words all through scripture are about action: “*Follow me.*”

This principle is basic to positive interfaith dialogue. Marzouk reminds us that we are all enriched when all parties “engage as equal subjects who speak for themselves and about their own faith.”⁵ It’s a principle that is important in major interfaith efforts, but probably it is even more important for each of us in our everyday interaction with people around us—most of the time we don’t even recognize it as “interfaith dialogue.” Let the other person tell you what he believes; let the other person *show* you her faith. Be open to listening to what they say. It’s not a matter of arguing about “Whose God?”... or about telling the other that you have the only true answer. It is a matter, if we listen to this story, of recognizing—and demonstrating—God’s mercy.

As a suggestion of how we do that, Rabbi Donniel Hartman encourages us in his new book “to put God second.” He suggests that we emphasize the second great commandment that is like the first: “love your neighbor as yourself.” He contends that decency toward one’s neighbor must always take precedence over acts of religious devotion. [He takes a whole book to explore that; his lecture on this subject last fall is still on line at the Kaufman Interfaith Institute.] His point is that as long as devotion to God comes first, responsibility to other people will trail far, far behind.⁶ Even the elders in this story put their devotion to God and the purity of their religion second to helping the oppressor who, they said, is “worthy of your doing this for him.”

⁵ Marzouk, 23.

⁶ Donniel Hartman, *Putting God Second: How to Save Religion from Itself* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), from the book jacket, reflecting personal notes from his lecture, October 29, 2015, Triennial Dialogue.

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The characteristic that helps me most in the arena of living among people who are different than I is the Presbyterian practice – and value – of forbearance. It was basic to the formation of our denomination and our Book of Order, and it has been my experience over many years, now, of how this congregation most often deals with each other and the issues before us. Forbearance is characterized by patient self-control, restraint and even tolerance: the ability to stay with the conversation or relationship, even if only to put up with the other when you completely disagree with him because your relationship and the community itself are more important than your own opinion.

Forbearance reminds us that God is bigger than our own experience. We here at Westminster exercised forbearance in our discernment, our long discernment regarding sexual orientation and gender identity. Surely, our principle of forbearance applies to our Black Lives Matter discussions, and I think it is increasingly important to apply forbearance in the reality of this political year.

How do we welcome absolutely everyone?

I find the last phrase of the pope's statement to be the most profound: He says, about God, *"the medicine is there, the healing is there—if only we take a small step toward God; or even just the desire to take that step."* Take a step, or even "just the desire" to take a step. Simply the intent to reach out is important. Maybe the centurion understood everything about the God of Israel and who Jesus is and what was going on, but I doubt it. The story seems to say that he simply tried to do the right thing—he tried to see goodness in the others—the elders, his friends, Jesus, and his slave, whom he valued highly. Mercy is about behavior—it's about kindness, about "compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone...."

Living in the Spirit in these Pentecost days means having the faith to trust being open, to take a risk with another, and surely, to *hear* the intent of the other, and to respond in mercy.

In the name of God: Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. Amen.