

Responding To Outsiders

1 Kings 8:22-23, 41-43

Luke 7:1-10

A sermon delivered by Reverend Thomas K. Frizzell, Jr, the Chapel Pastor of the United States Naval Academy, on the Second Sunday after Pentecost, May 29, 2016 (Memorial Day Weekend).

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!¹

Emma Lazarus' sonnet, *The New Colossus*, is engraved on a bronze plaque and mounted inside the lower level of the pedestal upon which the Statue of Liberty rests. This *Mother of Exiles*², with outstretched arm, raises her lamp high, welcoming immigrants, from East and West, North and South, clamoring to our shores.

On Memorial Day, we pause to remember all who gave their lives while defending our nation. Of those, many were among the *huddled masses, yearning to breathe freely* in a new land. One such foreigner was Sergeant Michael Strank, who emigrated from Czechoslovakia via Ellis Island and was killed in action during the battle of Iwo Jima. Days before his death by Japanese artillery, Sgt Strank, along with five others, raised the large American flag on Mount Suribachi, one of the iconic photographs of WWII and the inspiration for the Marine Corps War Memorial and the architecture of the Marine Corps Museum. Sgt Strank wore the cloth of our nation, raised the Stars and Stripes on enemy territory, and made the ultimate sacrifice in the defense of freedom. He was a foreigner that became a hero.

Foreigners have often been scapegoated across history, blamed for whatever is not going smoothly. This is true for portions of the biblical record as well, to include dire warnings about marrying foreigners and embracing their gods. When confronted with negativity toward foreigners in the bible, one might forget that all of humankind was created in God's image and through Abraham all nations would be blessed. However, there are passages, such as 1 Kings 8, specifically verses 41-43, portraying foreigners in a positive light.

King Solomon prays at the dedication of the newly constructed temple in Jerusalem, thanking God for his faithfulness to Israel. In addition, Solomon commends the foreigners who seek favor, imploring God to grant their petitions. Other Old Testament passages provide specifics. The Syrian General Naaman, a foreigner, hears of God's work through the prophet Elisha and is healed of leprosy. The Moabite widow, Ruth, a foreigner, seeks God's favor and figures prominently in the genealogy of King David and Jesus. And in our Gospel text, Jesus responds favorably to a Roman Centurion, a foreigner, granting his request.

Jesus has been preaching The Sermon on the Plain, imploring those gathered to be disciples that love friends and enemies alike. Now, in Capernum, Jesus is encouraged to practice what he preaches, an occupational hazard for those that dare to practice the art of homiletics! The correct doctrine (orthodoxy) revealed in the Sermon on the Plain must now be lived out in correct behavior (orthopraxy).

The leaders of the Jewish community were begging, pleading, imploring (imperfect tense, indicating repeated action) Jesus to grant the request of an occupying Roman General, a foreigner – who normally would be considered an arch enemy, but in this instance, possesses several redeeming qualities. Why were the Jewish leaders so persistent; could Jesus have been apprehensive, hesitant to respond? As a church leader, I am certainly mindful of whose company I entertain, wishing to cause no scandal that would damage the church. The centurion has a very ill slave, a boy (*pais* - child, vs 7), that he honors greatly. Is it possible that the young slave is Jewish? In addition, the centurion is a benefactor of the Jewish community, having built their synagogue. This is a different sort of centurion indeed, caring for a mere servant, maintaining good relations with those he is charged to subdue, and asking the Jewish leaders to intercede with Jesus on his behalf! What if the centurion's superiors caught wind of a general that coddles Jews?

Jesus begins to make his way to the centurion's villa, where, had he entered the premises, Jesus would have become unclean – required to avoid that which was holy, until being restored. But no worries - word of Jesus' approach has spread and the centurion sends friends to stop his advance and relay a message. Although the leaders of the Jews thought the centurion was worthy of Jesus' favor, the centurion did not feel he was worthy to

receive Jesus in his home. The centurion would have been honored to receive his emperor, Herod Antipas, but feels unworthy to receive Jesus who represents the God of the Jews! Yet another redeeming quality of the centurion - humility! The centurion honors Jesus by recognizing the authority Jesus has under God. Just as the centurion can speak and move armies, he is certain that Jesus can speak and his beloved slave will be healed. Jesus is amazed and commends the faith of the foreigner, healing the slave, thus laying the foundation for the sequel to Luke's Gospel, Acts of the Apostles, in which salvation is offered beyond Israel to the gentiles - to foreigners like you and me!

How do we treat foreigners? Is what we believe (orthodoxy) in alignment with what we do (orthopraxis)? On a national level, are we willing to receive refugees? I seem to recall that Joseph, Mary and Jesus were political refugees, fleeing into Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod the Great! For those illegal aliens that are already among us, do we detain and deport them or normalize their status? Do we build walls to keep the foreigner out or do we continue to welcome the *huddled masses*? These are difficult national issues without easy answers; however, in our Christian communities of faith, we have a biblical imperative to welcome all, regardless of how they speak, how they dress, or where they come from. We deem no-one unworthy to join this community of faith, because we are unworthy foreigners ourselves. We welcome foreigners like Ruth, knowing they may become heroes of the faith. We welcome the *huddled masses*, foreigners like Sgt Strank, knowing they may become heroes of our nation. As a community of faith, we tear down barriers to entry, offering salvation to all. For we know, "God does not show favoritism but accepts those from every nation who fear him" (Acts 10:34-35). We know that:

*In Christ there is no East or West;
In Him no South or North;
But one great fellowship of love
Thro'-out the whole wide earth.*³

1 A portion of *The New Colossus*, a sonnet written by American poet Emma Lazarus (1849–1887).

2 Ibid

3 *In Christ There is no East and West*, first stanza, hymn text by John Oxenham.