

“I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring **all** nations on earth will be blessed, because Abraham obeyed me and did everything I required of him, keeping my commands, my decrees, and my instructions.”

– Genesis 26: 4-5

Thus was Isaac reassured by the God of his father Abraham that the promise to the father still applied to the son and his descendants. But God’s blessing was not **only** for **their** decedents, but was to **radiate** out to **all** made in God’s image, to all of **us**.

On this the third Sunday in the season of Pentecost, the voices of the first Christian pentecost echo clearly in the scriptures suggested by the lectionary as they form a trajectory towards a **borderless** reign of God - towards the promise of pentecost: a bio-**integrated** body of Christ. (Not merely bio-diverse, bio-**integrated**.) That’s not an entirely new theme for us, but being at the **heart** of the very **nature** of the Christian faith, it bears further attention.

The suggested readings for this Sunday begin with the famous story of the prophet Elijah challenging the followers of a foreign god to a contest. From there we are directed back in time to the prayer of Solomon, the great cosmopolitan philosopher-king, as he dedicated the first temple where God agreed to meet **us**. Solomon prayed especially for **foreigners** who will be drawn to the temple and asked his God to hear the prayers of those **gentiles**. Next we are directed to the introduction of Paul’s letter to the Galatians in which Paul vigorously defended the rights of **non-Jews** to join the Jesus movement without first needing to become Jewish. Finally, Luke tells of Jesus’ encounter with a **most unlikely believer** - a commander in Rome’s army.

This morning we will focus on the first and last of these passages: Elijah on Mount Carmel, and Jesus and the Roman centurion. These stories seem at odds with each other: the first appearing to emphasize purity and **exclusion**; the latter, radical **inclusion**. Let’s look again at each.

Elijah was a prophet of the northern kingdom of Israel that had been split from the south (Judah). Israel's King Ahab had been seduced by the security and wealth afforded by alliances with neighboring **gentile** kingdoms. He sealed one of those alliances by marrying the much maligned Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon in Samaria. Ahab had also been seduced into the worship of the gods of his polytheistic neighbours, in particular the god Baal.

Now, I have oversimplified the case some. To say that, at this stage, Israel's religion was purely **monotheistic** - that they believed in the existence of only one God - is imprecise; for it seems they allowed that there could be other gods. Where they differed from their neighbours was that they were **only** to worship the God of Abraham - the **highest** ranking and by far the most **powerful** of all gods. They were not to put any other gods before him, according to the first commandment. But their own king Ahab had done just that, and many other Israelites with him.

The other part of the oversimplification is this: "Baal" - a word used many times in the Old Testament - did not **always** refer to a pagan god. Early on, Baal seems to have been used interchangeably with other ancient Semitic terms like "El" (as in Isra-EL) - all of which meant simply, "Lord" in the way English applies that word to gods and even people of authority. So if you are reading along in Exodus, or Joshua, or Judges as I know you people are so very wont to do, and you come upon the term Baal and it isn't entirely obvious that Baal is a bag god, or is even different than the Jewish God - you're not crazy: early on that distinction was blurry.

But by **Elijah's** time Baal referred to a different god than the God of Israel, one probably associated with fertility and worshipped on hill tops, probably involving temple prostitutes. It is this Baal worship that Elijah condemns. He challenged Baal's priests to a duel, in fact, in which the weapon of choice was fire reigning down from heaven so as to consume an offering. After much praying, dancing, and self-mutilation - all the while Elijah trash-talking Baal from the sidelines - the

priest of Baal failed to convince their god to send fire from heaven to take the offering of a slaughtered ox.

Then it was Elijah's God's turn to give Israel a sign that **he** was the one **true** God. But before calling on God to send fire upon the altar, Elijah took a further step of faith by having 12 large jars of **water** poured over the offering. This was daring not only because it would make the offering harder to burn, but also because it asserted faith in his God to address the much **bigger** problem facing Israel: the severe multi-year **drought** that has been devastating the land. Elijah "wasted" precious water on the altar to signify that he had faith that his God could send not only fire from heaven, but also desperately needed **rain**. After a simple prayer, the God of Abraham sent fire from heaven that consumed the ox, the wooden altar, the water, and even the rocks and soil nearby. The people of Israel fell on their faces in **fear** proclaiming that YHWH was **indeed** the greater God, while a stunned King Ahab reported these events to his furious queen. Soon after, the rains returned to Israel.

So there you have it, a story of **exclusion**, right? - YHWH is good, Baal is bad. Israel is in, Samaria is out. Sure, YHWH **is** good indeed, and we should not worship any other gods. But is that **all** we heard? Did we hear anywhere in this story a voice of **invitation**, of welcome: the **beckoning** home to a faithless people by their faithful God? Did we see the depiction of Abraham's God as a God of **breadth**: more than a provincial deity with limited domain over a **small** portfolio; the God of Abraham is **maker** of **heaven and earth** and **all** therein. Elijah's rejection of the **minor** deity Baal and call to faithfulness to the **maker** of heaven and earth is an invitation to join a **broader** community of belief; to join **big** tent religion.

The theme of extension and invitation is even more starkly drawn in today's gospel reading. Luke, Matthew, and John each have a story about a centurion with a sick household member in need of healing, and the surprising faith of that centurion. Luke actually tells two parallel stories of centurions of faith: the better known story being that of Cornelius and his household who Peter converts in the

book of Acts. We often look to **that** conversion under the ministry of Peter as the beginning of the Christian mission to the gentiles, later taken up more earnestly by Paul. But Luke, the author of Acts, has already set the gentile mission in motion in his gospel with the story of **our** centurion under the ministry of **Jesus** himself. More than that, it is less a story of conversion than of pre-ordained integration: for **this** centurion seems **already** to have faith, even before Jesus comes upon him. So this is a story about the thread of a **common** faith that transcends culture and connects people of different cultures. Actually, even the story of Cornelius in Acts is as much about Peter's conversion as it is the centurion's.

Luke's is the only gospel whose version of today's story has a centurion with the cultural competence and grace to send intermediaries who are members of Jesus' **own** faith community to ask for Jesus to heal his servant. Indeed, the local Jewish elders are **eager** to intervene on behalf this particular Roman officer whose good will towards **them** has been so exceptional that he even built them a synagogue. The centurion's character is further evidenced in his unusual compassion for his gravely ill servant. This is the kind of person Luke sometimes refers to as a "God fearer" - that is, a gentile who respects and may even believe in the God of Abraham, even if they do not keep all the law of Moses.

Of course it was not hard to persuade Jesus to go to the centurion's home to tend to the servant; but while he was on the way, other emissaries of the centurion met Jesus and his entourage and explained that the **centurion** did not feel worthy to receive in his home someone of such high rank as he esteemed **Jesus** to be - a Roman centurion says this of an itinerant Jewish preacher! It is further explained that he knows Jesus has authority to do whatever needs to be done merely by saying the word.

Upon hearing this, Jesus did something he rarely does in the gospels: he publicly praised a specific individual. And what praise it was! Jesus declared to the mostly, if not entirely, Jewish crowd; that nowhere in all of **Israel** had he found **anyone** with such faith as this **Roman military officer's**. For those of us in the

peace church tradition this may be a little hard to swallow. How would you react if, having gotten to know all of **us**, Jesus turned to us and declared, “Nowhere in all of anabaptism have I found anyone with the faith of the current commander at CFB Trenton!”? Jesus is talking about a member of the Roman military-industrial complex that was **occupying his** homeland and, often enough, oppressing **his** people!

Setting apart **this particular** gentile for this exceptionally high praise is **not** accidental, either from the mouth of Jesus or the pen of Luke. The point is clear: the **most** gentile person he could find has more faith than any Israelite he could find. Mind you, part of what **makes** this man such a righteous gentile is his kindness towards Abraham’s people; who in turn love him for it. This is how it is **supposed** to be: the blessing of Abraham radiating **out** to the rest of us, bringing to birth a **truly** pentecostal church - a borderless church: a bio-**integrated** body of Christ.

As I said, this is not a new theme for us. We often remind ourselves that the church of Jesus is, by definition, cross-cultural. It is not, “**non-cultural.**” I was once introduced to someone by one of my Russian Mennonite bible college professors this way: “This is Jeff Taylor, he’s a non-ethnic mennonite.” Of course, that’s not really **true**: I am not **lacking** ethnic identity, nor are any of you. How deeply that dimension of our identity is felt by each of us may vary, but we can all claim some sort of cultural identity - **none** of us are generic human beings.

But we are just one human people. What makes racism **truly** crazy is that there is **no such thing as race.** That is, race is not a scientific/biological concept. We are all one race called homo sapien sapien (literally, the group that is smart smart). My students always look at me pretty skeptically when I explain this because most of them (and I fear too many of us) actually believe that there **are** genetic differences between humans that can be organized by clearly defined **rac**es: white people, black people, brown people, and Asians are usually the categories my students name. When I ask them how they can tell if someone is a different race than they are, they usually say by skin colour. So then I ask how

many of them have siblings with different skin tone than they have and a third to a half will raise their hands. So I ask them, “Are you and your siblings of different races?”

If I were to ask you, as I have my students, whether I am more likely to be more closely related to the darkest-skinned person in the room or the lightest, you might (as my students always do) assume that it was the lightest. But the fact is there is **no** way to know that. If siblings can differ in appearance from one another, and children differ even more from their parents, it might only take three or four generations (depending on who marries and procreated with who) for very dark-skinned folks to find me hanging around in their family tree; or even more likely, the other way around. Of course, **all** of us have common ancestors - our common family emerging first in Africa it turns out; that is now virtually certain as evidenced by traditional archeology and, more recently, by evidence from the human genome project.

The fact is we know **nothing** about a person’s particular ancestry from looking at them. Even **less** do we know anything about their **personality, values, and character**. But we homo sapiens rely heavily on our vision and its strongest trait: the ability to differentiate **colours** - a great advantage in determining which fruits and vegetables are ripe, or which foods or frogs or snakes might be poisonous. But our reliance on our colour vision drives us to make **too much** of our different appearance from one another.

Categorization helps us make sense of our world and saves us time in understanding the nature of the specific if we can assume some characteristics inherited from the general. And of course there **is** culture and people within these categories, by definition, do share some common practices. But we humans take this **too far** as well and assume we know an individual because we think we know their people. Stereotypes, like statistics, apply (if at all) **only** to groups, **never** to individuals.

There are no races, there are simply family resemblances which are quite temporary. Look around the room and say hi to your cousins because you actually **are all** relatives of each other. So we owe it to each other to know one another as individuals. In birthing a borderless church, God is calling us to view one another as God does - to look at ourselves and each other through heaven's eyes. If we are filled with the Spirit of Christ, we can do no other.

In **past** ages we took it as a sign that we had begun to fulfill this mission if the Christian faith had been broadly shared and accepted around the globe; and it has been more than any other religion - a significant accomplishment. More recently we have made our churches more cross-culture by welcoming those different in some way from the majority; by tolerating our differences; maybe even by celebrating some of them.

But **now** the Spirit compels us to connect even **more** deeply to one another, like tendon to bone: to trust each other with the common **leadership** and care of the church, of **this** church - to go beyond bio-**diversity** towards bio- **integration**. To do otherwise, is to turn a deaf ear to the voices of pentecost speaking in our own tongues the good news of the **dissolution** of the walls of hostility between us.

The blessing of God is upon Abraham, his children, and **all** the children of God, all blood relatives, and all now being called into the promise of pentecost: the bio-integrated body of Christ.