**If it is all the same…**

IF there is one thing that has been said a lot about the pandemic or the coronavirus, it has been what a great equalizer COVID is… that this disease does not discriminate. And, to a certain extent I do agree – everyone and anyone gets it… rich or poor, young or old, white or brown bodied, educated or not… But I am not sure about the great equalizer part… if anything, it seems to me that it laid bare the inequalities. Yes, we are all in the storm, but what we have to make it through the storm, and how, is certainly not the same.

I am wondering if this is what we see in the combination of stories that we heard today. Death came knocking at the door of two very different families. Different ethnicities, different faiths, different social status, different genders. The only commonality they held was what we all have in common… illness and death come knocking at our loved-ones or at our own doors at some point or another.

I have to admit – I struggle with the first… A Roman Centurion – a powerful man who commanded a company of 100 soldiers of the world’s most powerful army. He was part of the oppressive regime; a man of status and means, enforcing the laws and taxes that kept the Jewish people oppressed. He owned a slave – probably several of them – a common thing in the ancient world. A lot of this was indentured slavery – people who sold themselves or family members to pay a debt. A slave that he valued… for monetary reasons? Or because he really cared?

The person enslaved by this centurion is so sick he is near death...and the Centurion – well, he has heard all the stories about Jesus and what he is able to do. So, the Centurion asks for a miracle, almost as if he knows he deserves one, either because of his station in life, or because of what he has done for the town by building a synagogue. The local elders must believe the same, as they run to Jesus to tell of the man’s worth and asks for restoration to health for the slave.

Seems like Jesus doesn’t hesitate – he sets out to the Centurion’s home. It seems odd to me… Jesus rushing out to help one who is part of the oppressive system - those who would later order his execution. Jesus rushing to restore a servant to health, knowing he will continue to be a “living tool” to his owner; not setting the slave free. Jesus rushing to the house of a Gentile which would render him unclean. From the perspective of many of Jesus' neighbors, this centurion represents everything that is wrong about the world.

Was it maybe because Jesus saw some compassion in the man? A slave owner valuing his servant so much that he asks for help when the servant needs it? But on his way, Jesus is stopped by another entourage sent by the Centurion… humbling himself as not worthy to host Jesus. Recognizing that in the face of the power of Jesus – the power over the forces of death, his military might have nothing. It cannot heal the sick or raise the dead. Jesus’ power heals communities; it brings the powerful down from their thrones and lifts up the lowly. That is, Jesus' power turns the world upside down and inside out. That a centurion would recognize this power is the very essence of faith; faith is seeing the world with God's eyes, to see the possibilities of a world renewed by God's love and God's grace.

Is this the faith that Jesus recognizes in the man that makes him rush over? A faith Jesus recognizes, and names as more than he has seen in all of God’s chosen? The faith of a Gentile?

Which brings us to the second household… A widow – underprivileged, at risk, worthless. At least her son still took care of her, but now, he also is dead. What would become of her life? A life now destined for poverty and destitution; a life of no status, begging and maybe even prostitution? A woman in mourning, who Jesus notices with compassion… not sympathy or empathy, but a stomach-twisting suffering with another person that is incomplete without action… Entering her pain, Jesus acts when he sees this grieving woman. A woman who asks for nothing in the midst of her mourning, immersed in her own world of pain. But Jesus notices… Jesus enters her grief, and without a thought of being made unclean, he touched her son and with a word, gives her son back to her.

We could hardly ask for a wider difference between two recipients of Jesus’ attention. There is a chasm between their circumstances and stations in life that seems impossible to cross. Rich vs poor, male vs female, power and status vs worthlessness. Noticed vs overlooked and trampled on. Two miracles – one a healing, one a raising from the dead… One with a word from afar, one with a touch. One asking out of faith, the other without a word…

And yet, they are more similar than we realize. They both received the miracle on behalf of another – a slave healed because his owner asked; a son raised because of his mother’s need. All of them are “outsiders” – a Roman, a slave, a widow and a dead man. And yet, Jesus’ voice reaches all of them, exactly where they are. The living word speaks not only to those who ask, not only to those who are worthy, but also to those who are at the bottom rungs of society. Jesus shows compassion not only to those who deserves it, but even to those that we or society might deem unworthy.

See, that is the thing about God. Jesus takes time to be with those who others, or us for that matter, choose to ignore or exclude. Jesus welcomes everyone. We all join at the table today – the Lord’s table where all are welcome. Jesus did not discriminate – he dined with pharisees and the leaders of the religious establishments, with tax collectors, with prostitutes, and with sinners. He hung out at the houses of the rich and the poor, the religious and the gentiles. The criminal and the drug addict, the foreigner, the stranger and our worst enemy. The widow who lost her son and those with empty chairs due to COVID. The Q-Anon supporter and the progressive liberal… God does not leave anyone out.

Maybe this is the lesson we take away from today… the lesson that says that if it is all the same to God… In a world where there is so much pain and so much hatred and so much division and so much grief today… Jesus reaches with one voice to all to bring about a new community. Jesus reaches out with compassion and steps into the lives of all creation – worthy or not.

So, where do we still divide? Who do we still deem an enemy – those who sits on the other side of the political isle? The Muslim or the Jew? The immigrant? Those with darker skin than ours? Who do we see as not worthy? The homeless, the addict, the convicted felon, those who sit in generational poverty, the transgender girl or the uneducated? We are so quick to judge others as not deserving, as not as faithful… I know – I do it myself, especially in the political landscape of today. And if I am honest, I’d rather have God’s wrath rain down on “them” than God’s mercy and compassion…

But if it is all the same… if God shows compassion on everyone; treats everyone as God’s children; as bearers of God’s image, then maybe these two stories today ask us to do the same. Jesus welcomes even us on the days that others might feel we do not deserve it…

We are called upon daily to live in solidarity with those whose life circumstances are more vulnerable than our own, to intercede on their behalf to make life better in some way. We are to partner with God in the work of compassion and transformation. We should ask for miracles on behalf of others, who have no voice, or cannot ask for themselves, even if we’d rather not...

If it is all the same, may it be so.