

Outsider

A Marine recruiter in North Carolina shares the story of a young man who meets all the requirements and is ready to enlist in the Corps. The recruiter explains the importance of being truthful on the application. And the young man begins filling out his paperwork.

But when he gets to the question, “Do you own any foreign property or have any foreign financial interests?” he looks at the recruiter with a worried expression.

“Well,” he confesses, “I do own a Toyota.”

Of course, that Toyota was probably manufactured right here in the good old U.S.A.

But don't we tend to be a bit suspicious of all things foreign? The nuances of the word *foreign* evoke difference. Strangeness. The word *foreign* connotes something outside the boundaries of what's familiar. Outside the parameters of what's normal. Outside the scope of what we're accustomed to.

God's people Israel have become accustomed to a particular way of life. By the time of King Solomon, they have

great clarity about what defines them. About what sets them apart from other nations. They have their own code of justice. Their own food laws. Their own purity rituals. Their own calendar.

And they have their own sacred place. A place where they hope and expect to encounter the Holy One. The chosen people have their own temple. Solomon has been divinely appointed to build this temple. And it's been completed. In today's reading from First Kings, as Solomon dedicates the temple, we get to hear his praise and a portion of his prayer to the God of Israel.

But Solomon prays not only for his own people. Does it surprise you that he prays for *foreigners*? That he asks God to answer the prayers of outsiders? Solomon, in his wisdom, prays that those from other lands—those who don't belong to the covenant people—will come to know Israel's God. Will come to know that Israel's God is an awesome God. Solomon prays that even outsiders will know.

We hear about another outsider, as we fast-forward to the time of Jesus' ministry and to this Sunday's gospel reading. We hear about a centurion.

Now this centurion is a powerful figure. The commander of a unit of one hundred soldiers.

But he's not a Jew. He doesn't look like a Jew or talk like a Jew or dress like a Jew. He is a Gentile. He is a foreigner. He is a member of the imperial army that occupies the land—the despised Roman oppressors of the people of Israel.

He has a servant he sets great store by—one who is probably also a trusted friend. This servant lies critically ill. Near death. And the centurion has heard about a local wonder-worker. He's heard about a man named Jesus.

And Luke has heard the story of the centurion, his sick servant, and Jesus. Do you ever wonder how and why Luke and the other evangelists chose certain stories to put into their gospels? To share with readers like you and me? What do you suppose Luke's trying to tell us in this particular one? What does he want us to take away from this curious narrative?

To answer these questions, I think we begin by taking a closer look at the portrait Luke paints of this centurion. This outsider. We learn about him through what others say about him. Through what he says about himself. Through what he says to Jesus through others. And through what Jesus says about him.

We find out what this centurion is made of. And it's not what we would have expected in a foreigner.

First of all, he's been a good friend to the Jewish citizens of Capernaum. He's built their place of worship, their synagogue—built it probably at his own expense. He's a caring and generous person whom community leaders affirm as *worthy* of having Jesus heal his servant.

But who in humility declares himself *unworthy*. Unworthy of having Jesus even come to his home. This centurion shows concern for Jewish sensitivities about entering the house of a Gentile.

A Gentile. A military man with authority. An officer used to issuing commands, to saying a word and having it be done.

What Luke wants us to understand is that this outsider trusts that if *Jesus* says the word, it will be done. Without so much as a touch, it will be accomplished. *Only speak the word*, he asks, *and let my servant be healed*.

Such great faith in the authority of Jesus and in the healing power of Jesus' word alone! For this centurion never does meet Jesus face-to-face. His request is made to One he never sees. His

request to Jesus is a prayer. It's very like the prayers of us here and now who have not seen Jesus with physical eyes.

And we know that prayers are heard and answered, just as—when his servant is healed—this centurion's prayer is heard and answered.

A prayer offered through others. Those Capernaum leaders are willing to approach Jesus for the sake of an outsider. For the sake of a person who some would consider an enemy. Are *we* willing to approach Jesus for such a person? This One who calls us to pray for enemies has a special concern and care for the outsider.

Does an outsider's faith surprise you? Does the deep faith of the centurion surprise you? It *definitely* surprises Jesus! And *he* doesn't get surprised easily or often. But Luke tells us that Jesus is amazed at the faith of this outsider. You and I too can expect to be surprised by the faith we find in all kinds of people.

People who come from foreign lands. People who don't look like us. Or talk like us. Or dress like us. We're not too sure about these outsiders. We like to think of ourselves as *insiders* with a rightful place. But what we tend to forget—we whose families have been here for centuries—is that unless we're full-

blooded Native American, we ourselves come from immigrant stock. That's where our roots are. Our ancestors came from foreign countries.

It's the same way in the church. If I belong to the same denomination Granddaddy belonged to, or if I show up every week at the same church where Grandma taught Sunday school and sang in the choir, does that in itself guarantee me a place in the kingdom? It does not!

Like Israel in biblical times, we in the church tend to think of ourselves as the chosen ones. As God's covenant people. But how did we come to enjoy that status? Did I attain it because of any worth or merit of my own? Certainly not. Did I earn it? I did not. Do I deserve it? I do not.

I'm here today—each one of us is here today—only because of the goodness and the unfailing mercy and the limitless forgiveness and the measureless grace of our God. Who has given the precious gift of faith. For you are saved through faith alone.

Faith in the One who has invited you. Faith in the One who has welcomed you. Faith in the One who has included you in God's family. Faith in the One who has nurtured you. Faith in

the One who has blessed you. Faith in the One who loves you with a steadfast love. Every one of you. Every one of us outsiders!

But you know, this Christ who loves us does even more. Today he sends us forth. Today he sends us out these doors to live a life of love and prayer, of humility and generosity, of service and witness and faithfulness. To celebrate the rich and beautiful diversity God has created around this earth. To invite the foreigner. To welcome the stranger. To include the alien. So that all people, everywhere, may hear of the great name, may hear of the outstretched arm, may hear of the mighty hand, may hear of the healing power, may hear the good news of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.