

Jesus, Friend of...Foreigners
Matthew 8:5-13
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Did you hear the news this week that we have the first recorded picture of a black hole in space? A grad student at MIT named Katie Bouman figured out a way to take a picture of a black hole. Are you serious? God is amazing, and what God has given us the ability to do through science is even more amazing! I don't about you, but I was surprised to discover that the black hole was full of single socks that had been lost from their match. So that's where they go!

Space just blows my mind. Quasars, black holes, extra-terrestrials. Try to wrap your head around this: as far as we know, the universe has no end. It just keeps going. You could fly off into space and never, ever reach the end of it. It's like driving through western Kentucky. To be honest, that freaks me out a bit to think the universe just keeps going, no wall to run into or traffic cones with "End of the Road" signs on them.

I think that bothers me because, as a human being, I like boundaries. I like to know where things start and finish, that everything has a beginning and an end. Boundaries allow us to delineate who's in and who's out, who's with us and who's against us, who's one of us and who's one of them. While we know it's the right thing to say, we don't always feel comfortable with the idea that we're all the same, all God's children, one body of Christ. It's a lot easier to see and name our differences than it is to acknowledge our similarities. We know who we are because we're NOT those who are different than us. This is where "we" stop and "them" starts.

Jesus pushed back on this, as he does on so many things. He risked being friends with people that forced him to cross boundaries, to violate social and national taboos. He hung with the lowest in society, like women and children. He spent time with outcasts, like the sick and the mentally ill. He gave his valuable time to the people who had no value in society, like the poor. As we conclude our sermon series on the people with whom Jesus was friends, we're looking at what may be the most controversial group of friends Jesus had, both then and now. Foreigners.

Obviously, this is a touchy issue today. Our country is divided over how we are to treat foreigners who cross boundaries into the United States. Some people say we should welcome them with open arms and treat them like they are our brothers and sisters. Others say we need to build walls and ban certain groups and protect ourselves from this influx of people who pose a threat to us. So which side is right? Well, let's turn to the Bible and see what it says. The Bible is always a great source of wisdom, isn't it? I'm gonna solve this debate right now. When it comes to foreigners, should we welcome them in or keep them out? The Bible says...yes.

That's one of the problems with the Good Book. You can find passages to support opinions on both sides of all kinds of issues. When it comes to how we deal with foreigners, you can support either extreme. When the Israelites are preparing to enter the Promised Land, God is very clear that they are not to intermingle in any way with the pagan nations that occupy the land. God wanted the Israelites to stay pure and holy, not to be contaminated by the false gods and sinful practices of the surrounding foreigners. We know that the holy city of Jerusalem had a wall built around it to keep out unauthorized people and to prevent the city from being besieged. So, if you're looking for a reason not to be friends with foreigners, it's right there in the Bible.

But the Bible also has a few things to say on the other side of the issue. In fact, it says a lot more about welcoming in than keeping out. Our first passage is a great example of this, saying that God loves the foreigners living among us and calls us to love them, as well. The

Hebrew Scriptures are replete with admonishments to care for the widow and the orphan, the stranger and the alien. In the New Testament, the book of Hebrews reminds us that we are to welcome in the stranger, because when we do so, we may very well be entertaining angels without even knowing it. So, if you're looking for a reason to be friends with foreigners, it's right there in the Bible.

May the best question to ask is: What is a foreigner? How do we define them? The dictionary says they are a person not belonging to a particular place or group, a stranger or outsider. So, how do we tell when there is a foreigner among us? Can we tell by how they look? What language they speak? What clothes they wear? A person could look differently than us, speak a different language than us, dress differently than us, and still be a U.S. citizen. So, by those definitions, the person I think is a foreigner may actually be as American as I am. Hmm.

OK, maybe we define a foreigner as someone who's not originally from here. They may live here, but they are still strangers to us. They aren't Americans in the original sense of the word. But...unless you're a Native American, neither are you. God says in Deuteronomy, "And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt." We've all come here from somewhere else. We're all foreigners. Man, this boundary-drawing stuff is really hard when God gets involved.

In fact, Jesus was like a big eraser sent from God, eradicating the boundaries we humans worked so hard to put up. He weaves in and out of Gentile territory, interacts with a foreign woman at a well, and makes a dreaded Samaritan a hero in his parable. But that's not the worst of it. The only people hated more by the Jews than the Samaritans were the Romans, who stood with their foot on the neck of the Jewish people. And yet, Jesus not only talks with the Roman centurion, he not only heals his servant, but he says the centurion's faith is greater than that of all the Jews.

One of the reasons for this is what happens when the centurion speaks to Jesus. Did you catch Jesus' reaction? It says Jesus was amazed. I would expect that didn't happen often. I would think Jesus had seen it all, so he didn't get amazed easily. He didn't fall for the quarter-behind-the-ear trick. He would probably look at an incredible sunset and be like, "Yeah, I made that." In fact, there's no other place in the gospels where Jesus is amazed, except at the thick-headedness of his disciples. But when the centurion asks for help, Jesus is amazed.

The centurion says, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man 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." What's so amazing about this? The centurion is acknowledging, far better than Jesus' disciples, the kind of authority Jesus has. The centurion is used to commanding legions of soldiers, and yet he bows to the authority of this itinerant rabbi. Meanwhile, Jesus' disciples are thumb-wrestling over who gets to sit next to him when they all get to Heaven. You see the problem here? Jesus is treated much differently by outsiders than by insiders.

By virtue of our faith, our upbringing, our commitment to God and the church, most of us are insiders. We know the love and grace of God, we've experienced it first-hand, we've seen it in action. We know the stories, we know the songs, we know the prayers...so we think we know Jesus. And the more we think we know Jesus, the more Jesus stops looking like a Middle Eastern Jewish rabbi – a foreigner – and starts looking – and thinking and acting – more like us. The more inside we get, the more we think we know who Jesus would love and who Jesus would

welcome and where Jesus would draw boundaries because that's what we would do. Jesus is supposed to hate Samaritans and Romans? Why? Because we do!

The centurion didn't know the hymns, didn't give an offering, wasn't listed in the church directory. He just trusted that Jesus could heal his servant, and he lays his job on the line to ask Jesus for a miracle. Jesus sees in this man a faith unencumbered by ritual and dogma and labels. He sees, not a Roman soldier, not an outsider or stranger, but a vulnerable human being in need of help.

That's what we often miss. When we talk about foreigners today, we do so as if they are a monolithic group of people, all with the same intent of infiltrating our country, perpetrating acts of violence, wiping out or unique way of living. Funny, that sounds a bit like what we did to the Native Americans, doesn't it? We've been told to fear the stranger because they are not like us. But Jesus says to welcome the stranger because they ARE like us, and they can show us things that we have lost the ability to see.

In 2011, I asked a couple that had been visiting Crestwood to do fill out a "secret shopper" survey of their time with us. I gave them a bunch of questions about their Sunday morning experience here and asked them to give me an honest appraisal of what they saw and heard. Their response was brutally honest, with an emphasis on "brutally." They didn't feel welcomed, they didn't know where to go, and they said worship was "boring." The even said our choir looked old. I summarized their findings in the Crest and had several upset people call me, convinced that I made it up. But here's the thing: for the most part, they were right (except about the choir!), and we implemented some changes to address their observations.

Sometimes we can become so inside that we miss what someone from the outside can bring us. We focus on the differences, the strangeness, the things we're told to fear, and we forget that the person who we think of as an outsider could actually be an angel without us even knowing it. At the very least, they are human beings and deserve to be treated as such. I would guess that those of us who are afraid of foreigners have never had the experience of being a foreigner ourselves. Once you know what it's like to be a stranger and an outsider, you have more sympathy for those who feel the same way and you are more willing to extend grace.

That's why I think Jesus paid so much attention to foreigners. He knew what it was like to be outside the establishment, to be thought of as strange, to be feared to the point that people wanted to kill him. He sympathized with outsiders. That's why he says to his followers that outsiders like the centurion will have the best seats at God's banquet, while those who think they are on the inside may find themselves on the wrong side of the wall.

That's tough stuff for us insiders to deal with. We like to think we have it all figured out, that we're secure in our place with God. And by virtue of our faith in Christ, we are. But I also believe that the security we find through God, which is based on love and hospitality, is more important than the security we put in place to keep people on the outside. The gospel of Jesus Christ is never moving inward. It is growing, expanding outward, limitless like our universe. There are no boundaries that can contain the kingdom of God because in that kingdom, we are all welcome inside. What is it we pray every Sunday? Oh yeah..."thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."