

February 5, 2017 Epiphany 5 (narrative)
Scripture Luke 7:1-10 "Through the Eyes of God"

In the Q'ran, it is written: "O Humankind, We created you from a single pair of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, so that you may know one another." (Quran 49:13).

Recently, I read a book entitled *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nahisi Coates. This love letter from a father to his son was for me, profoundly moving and illuminating. In it, Ta-Nahisi, himself a black American male, describes a brief encounter with a young black man. Reaching towards an airport conveyer belt to grab his bag, and accidentally bumping into the young the man, he says, "My bad," to which the stranger replies, "You straight." With these four words, they identify one another as being of the same tribe. Without knowing one another, they know one another. There is an easy sort of intimacy, and an immediate rapport. In the context of a larger culture that has been and remains, in many ways, hostile towards young black men, this interchange offers a moment of comfort—an unexpected gift. "We... made you into nations and tribes, so that you may know one another."

Ta-Nahisi's story is a tiny example of the gifts of comfort, familiarity and mutual support that may come with being clustered together with others who share a similar culture, language, tradition, religion, and life experience. And then there is the flip side--that the 'creation of nations and tribes' may not only help us know one another within tribes or nations—it may also make us strangers to those of other tribes and nations. And strangers, it seems, by the very nature of their being different, hold the potential for being seen as not only exotic or fascinating, but also inferior, threatening, evil, or even as enemy. There is, of course, a word for this fear-- Xenophobia—the fear of those who are perceived to be foreign or strange.

There was a time when the members of our tribe were taught to 'tolerate' those different from us – whether they were of a different colour, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, or gender identity. Tolerance seemed to be the best we could hope for in one another—and even that often proved, and still proves, to be a stretch. Then the ante was upped--we said that we needed not only to tolerate, but to 'accept' those 'others'. Today, the bar has been raised again so that to merely 'tolerate' or 'accept' those different than our selves in any number of ways, can seem arrogant and stingy of soul. Many of us now aspire to 'affirm' and even 'celebrate' our diversity. Viva la' difference! In our own faith tradition, we sometimes speak of a mystical 'seeing the face of Christ—(or God) in the face of the other.'

On Thursday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau spoke at the funeral of three Muslim men—fathers, community members, worshippers-- shot down during a prayer service at a Quebec City mosque. Trudeau said that we gather around those who are hurting, "Because this is who we are as Canadians." With these words, he is using the powers of his office and his eloquence towards shaping our Canadian identity and culture as one that affirms, honours and celebrates our diversity as a nation encompassing a multitude of nations and tribes. With his words, and by his actions he is seeking to create an ethos of affirmation that celebrates our wild diversity-- all this in the face of a world that, in far too many places, counsels and even stokes the fires of fear, suspicion, hatred and division.

So what does any of this have to do with our reading from Luke? Does anyone here see any connection with this morning's gospel story?

When I looked at this story, the very first thing that leaped out of me was that a Roman Centurion (an official of an occupying force), is asking a favour of some Jewish Elders (members of a people occupied by Rome), on behalf of a slave (who knows from where or from whom he or she has been stolen)... These respected Jewish Elders approach a small-town itinerate preacher and healer (a back woods evangelist) on behalf of that Centurion. Isn't he the face of the enemy? And none of this makes sense—at least not according to our usual assumptions about the kinds of relationships these people from these different 'tribes' would have, and by all rights, should have had—or not had with one another. All together they include representatives of various tribes of oppressor and oppressed, who would seem to have plenty of reason to resent, dislike, distrust, or dismiss one another's needs. And, yet they don't! And, neither does Jesus! It seems that the heart of this occupier and the life of his slave are somehow precious to them all.

As for Jesus, in this gospel of Luke, he just doesn't seem to care who it is who comes to his attention, where or how they get there! He doesn't care if the person in need believes or doesn't, is Jewish or Gentile, whether they ask for help or they don't, or is even physically present. If someone is hurting, if someone is crippled, if someone is dying--he helps. He doesn't ask the Centurion to denounce his ties to Rome, be circumcised, and then come back and make a faith-filled request on bended knee! He simply and immediately responds to the need at hand. The Centurion's messengers leave Jesus standing in amazement at the faith of the Centurion, and return home to find the servant healed! Without a glance, a touch, or a word from Jesus, the slave has been healed. And please notice -- no one involved is asked to follow Jesus!

There seems to be no formula that Jesus uses in choosing to respond to the needs of those whom he encounters along the way. He simply responds wherever, whenever, to whomever he encounters in need. He does this because he is filled with divine compassion—and because he does not see us as members of this tribe or that nation. He sees us with the eyes of God. He knows the yearning of our hearts, and it seems he just can't help but respond with healing love.

Let me say that again. He just can't seem to help but respond with healing love. Perhaps that is the transformation that we are all invited to at this and every moment in history.

On Friday, I joined other faith leaders at the Juma Prayers at the Islamic Society of Toronto's Darus Salaam Mosque in Thorncliffe Park. There was deep gratitude in the eyes of our Muslim friends for this simple expression of our solidarity and protection as they grieve those lost in the devastating attack upon those praying men in a Quebec City mosque.

Now is the time. We are all called to find ways to show solidarity, compassion, and concern for our Muslim neighbours. Many will be feeling sad and shaken, terribly vulnerable and afraid in the aftermath of this terrible event.

At the end of Friday's service with its emphasis upon lament, forgiveness, and love, our MP, Rob Oliphant and a few faith leaders spoke words of solidarity, sympathy and support to the gathered community. The rabbi who spoke informed us that as we gathered, there were 7 mosques in Toronto surrounded by human chains of fellow Canadians joined arm to arm forming circles of protection and embrace for the duration of their Friday services. "Because that," at least in our best moments, "is who we are," as Canadians -- Christians, Jews and Muslims, Hindus, Zoroastrians and Buddhists, Agnostics and Atheists, men and women, gay and straight, black, white and brown -- members all of the human family.

This morning, we are invited into seeing ourselves, and others, beyond history's divisions, as fully human and as beloved. We are invited to see and cherish the human heart and the human body. As followers of the one who sees us and others with the merciful eyes of the Creator of all humanity. This morning, we are called again to a love that reveals and makes glad the heart of God.