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May 29, 2016

Grace Episcopal Church, Hopkinsville, KY

Proper 4/Year C/I Kings 18:20-39, Psalm 96, Galatians 1:1-12, Luke 7:1-10

“Global Human Heart”

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Breath of Life. Amen.

On this day—the Sunday after Trinity Sunday—we have slipped into that long church season called the season after Pentecost. This Sunday we make a shift—leaving behind all the dramatic happenings in Jesus’ life. All of the events that we have focused on throughout Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent and Easter have had mostly to do with Jesus’ birth, his baptism, his revelations of his Messiah-ship, his journey to Jerusalem, his death, resurrection and ascension, and the climax of the coming of the Holy Spirit in an especially powerful way at Pentecost. In the first half of our church year, the story of the foundation of our Christian faith has been told again, and now we transition into the stories of the real work that our faith calls us to do. The second six months of Sundays of the year are the time to focus on following Jesus and reflecting on what that following looks like and what shape it takes in the various contexts that we find ourselves in and that we live in.

Throughout the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments—a primary concern of the Jewish people and later of the early Christian community was “syncretism”—the combining of beliefs and/or practices of different religious faiths. In the Old Testament, an overarching question is--How will the people maintain their distinctive religious identity over time if they fall prey to the seduction of other religions? How will this new religion in which there is only one

God survive? And, in the New Testament—How will this fledgling sect survive if the people are unable to distinguish clearly between the teachings of Jesus and those of false teachers?

The scene from I Kings must be one of the most colorful in all of holy scripture. The kings of Israel have continually fallen away from worship of Yahweh—the one, true God of Israel—and have, many times over, gone to the other side and become worshippers of the most revered of the Canaanite fertility gods—namely Baal. The great prophet Elijah now arrives on the scene and carefully devises a dramatic contest to prove that Baal is powerless and that Yahweh is all-powerful—the real thing. Picture the images—the limping people and limping prophets, the bold and mocking Elijah, the prophets of Baal raving and slashing themselves to no avail, Elijah’s earnest prayer, Yahweh’s bold response, the people’s reaction—“The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God.”

The words of our Psalm echo the scene—“For great is the LORD and greatly to be praised; he is more to be feared than all gods. As for all the gods of the nations, they are but idols.”

Then, fast forward around a thousand years. We don’t know what the message is that these false teachers are spreading in the churches of Galatia, but we do know that the apostle Paul is “really hot” with anger. In his own way, perhaps his emotional state is not so different from that of Elijah at Mount Carmel. “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel”! Paul has to work diligently and pour out his heart and soul to make sure that these young Christians understand their faith and remain loyal to the commitments they have made to this new worshipping community—this *ecclesia*—this church.

Finally, we look at our gospel reading from Luke and hear about a character who must have been a true anomaly. A man who leads a division of the Roman army—he’s not only non-Jewish, but one of the occupiers—one of the oppressors--one of them! And, at the same time, he loves the Jewish people and has, in fact, built them a synagogue. How can this be? Similarly, he’s a slave owner—an offensive notion to us--but, at the same time, apparently has a very personal relationship with this servant, caring so deeply that he humbles himself to ask through others that Jesus intervene and heal the servant’s illness. Luke has mixed together a community of people in the scene—the Jewish elders, the friends—and, behind the scenes, the centurion and the slave. Jesus never even meets the centurion nor the slave—and yet he is so impressed with the community’s telling of the story that the healing is accomplished. “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith”—“Not even among my own people have I found such faith.” Jesus is not concerned about the centurion’s religious affiliation. Jesus has no temptation to convert him. The centurion’s faith is sufficient.

Perhaps every time and place has its own flavors of syncretism and its own concerns or lack thereof about the consequences—be they positive or negative. The issue of syncretism never goes away—either within particular religious groups or between factions within the same religious group. The Christian church as a whole has a history of dissension, as long as it has been in existence, over what beliefs and practices constitute “true” Christianity. Church members have a long history of disagreement over what the essentials are and over how much diversity is acceptable within the body. Most recently in the Episcopal Church, and in various other denominations, the divisive issue has been over what constitutes “purity” of faith. Does purity have to do with maintaining the letter of the law or maintaining the “tradition” of the

church, or does purity have more to do with the practice of justice? What happens when our understanding of justice evolves over time? Can we maintain the ideal of “unity in diversity” when the diversity often feels like we are being wrenched at the core of our beings. Episcopal priest Martin Smith writes, “God’s good news is for the whole of humanity, but it is vulnerable to mutation and perversion. We carry a terrible responsibility in our discernment” (Sojourners, June 2013, 48).

One of the effects of globalization is that we all live in a more and more diverse religious marketplace. I grew up in a small town that had one Jewish family and very few Catholic ones. Any exposure to religions beyond that was purely academic. Contrast that to now living in a nation that can no longer be accurately called a “Christian nation”—where our closest neighbors may be Hindu or Muslim—where pluralism is often the norm--where people move freely between various denominations or even between religions or maybe identify themselves as “hyphens”—embracing more than one religion at the same time. Many Christians have embraced Buddhist practices and have found enhancement rather than conflict between the two religions. Some of us may have read the books Living Buddha, Living Christ or Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers by Thich Nhat Hanh, the well-known Vietnamese Buddhist monk.

What are we to make of this mixing of religions--this syncretism? Does it have to be a negative thing? Do we need to be concerned? Or is it a good thing? Is God creating yet another “new thing”?

Sister Elaine Prevallet—my spiritual friend at Loretto—wrote an article for Weavings (Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life) a few years back entitled “Enlarging the Nest: Responding to a Multi-Religious Culture.” In the article, she suggests that religious groups that

encourage members to take a stance of being continual “learners” rather than “knowers” will be less threatened by an increasingly multi-religious culture.

In Elaine’s words, “Can we affirm our Christian revelation of the Word of GOD in Jesus, but allow that the Spirit of GOD has been moving within the whole of creation from the beginning, revealing insights into the Infinite Being of GOD, little by little sowing seeds that take different form and find (quite) varied expression in a multiplicity of cultures, languages, races? Can we take as one of our most important missions not to convert, but to learn from other religious traditions and paths, and understand that deep listening to another—with an open mind—must be a fundamental spiritual practice?...Is it possible that denominations might understand themselves as training grounds for formation of attitudes that belong to the highest expression of human being: compassion, service, reconciliation, a sense of justice, generosity, sharing and cooperation—and an ever-enlarging capacity for *encompassing* love? This in no way diminishes the importance of denominational identity...Nor is it suggesting a kind of surface sampling that disallows or replaces our need to plumb the depth of a particular tradition...The world is on the cusp of destruction or transformation, calling for change of perspective that affects everything from the ground up—and out. How can our grounding in the gospel of Jesus lead us into a larger, more encompassing frame of awareness, so that we can recognize GOD’s presence through and in the whole of creation?...we need a *human global heart*, one that never stops expanding until it is One with God’s own heart, God’s infinite love. This is the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst. This is our work” (Weavings, Volume XXVIII, Number 3, 8-9). Amen.