
Not Even in Israel Such Faith

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Proper 4 – Year C

In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

“Not even in Israel,” Jesus declares in today’s gospel, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith!” (Luke 7:9) And with this comparison it is clear how much Jesus’ Jewish heritage matters to him. The faith found in Israel is his preferred standard for faith, so when he finds a Gentile with comparable or even surpassing faith he is amazed, the scripture says.

In this connection it is important to notice that there’s a tug of war going on in our scriptures appointed for today. When Jesus exclaimed, “not even in Israel have I found such faith,” he highlighted for all time the possibility that another people’s capacity for and exercise of faith can be as powerful—and even more so—than the faith of one’s own, most righteous community of faith.

And yet our other scriptures remain critical of other people’s differences from our own, most righteous community of faith. Our readings begin with the contest of Elijah and the prophets of Baal assembled on Mount Carmel. Certainly the power of Elijah to call down holy fire from heaven demonstrates the divine preference for Israel’s faith tradition over that of its adversary in that context. And our epistle reading continues this emphasis on establishing and validating the divine preference for one’s own faith tradition over that of others. That’s where the apostle Paul declares:

But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed ... For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source ... but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:8, 11-12).

Now the apostle’s appeal in that last verse to the authority of Jesus himself sharpens the authority with which Jesus himself declares in today’s gospel, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith” (Luke 7:9).

I want to come back to this issue of comparing faith in Israel with the quality of faith among other peoples. But first, this emphasis on Jesus’ Jewish heritage reminds me of that little joke; the one about how we know that Jesus was Jewish.

How do we know that Jesus was Jewish? Three things:

- He lived at home until he was 30.
- He went into his father’s business.
- He knew his mother was a virgin, and she knew that he was God.

Well, the humor in that joke depends on knowing a few stereotypes about Jews, right? It’s okay; I give us all permission to admit that we know stereotypes about Jewish young men still living at home, and then going into the family business! And we also have stereotypes about Jewish mothers and their favorite sons adoring each other. But for today I need to put the spotlight on myself as an African American son with growing appreciation of my African American father.

This past week marked the first death anniversary of my father on May 20. Now I knew already a year ago that my father's death would create a sea change in my life. But I also knew that I could not yet tell how big a sea change it would be. Well, here's what I learned after a year of missing my father being in this world with me. I learned that I can now quote with pathos and holy fervor that e.e. cummings poem where he coined that incredible expression, "the dooms of love." Following the death of his own father he wrote:

my father moved through dooms of love
through sames of am through haves of give,
singing each morning out of each night
my father moved through depths of height.

www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/my-father-moved-through-dooms-love

And now, here's one of those "depths of height" emerging from my own father's "dooms of love." It's a West African 'doom of love' and 'depth of height' that I discovered in this past year since his homegoing. I have discovered my father becoming an ancestor to me; becoming reframed and re-commended to me as one among my most revered and venerable ancestors alongside other venerable ancestors in my African heritage; ancestors like W.E.B. DuBois and Sojourner Truth, ancestors like Howard and Sue Bailey Thurman, ancestors like Vincent and Rosemarie Harding—all of blessed memory for me. Finally, and not least on this holiday weekend, I honor my Dad as the WWII Navy veteran that he was; honorable alongside those service men and women whose life and death we acknowledge every Memorial Day.

Where I teach religion at Emory University one of our West African graduate students wrote a doctoral thesis years' ago that states this point in a single phrase. He has since published it as a book with the title, *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors*, by Anthony Ephirim-Donkor (UPA; revised ed. 2011). With that title the author offers a detailed study of the course of affairs through which, in his own native or indigenous tradition, one becomes an ancestor in due time and with due process. The process is not automatic or simply due to the fact of death itself. The process must be intentional or attended to with focus and features that guide and direct the appropriate outcome. Some rites and observances are deliberate but other developments depend on the ancestors' own power to communicate or act supernaturally or inspirationally on their own initiative; with their own character, will and intentions.

One feature of my father becoming ancestral was highlighted for me this past week a few days after his death anniversary. It occurred in a most unlikely manner during the observance of one of our so-called "lesser feasts and fasts" in our Anglican church tradition. I was the preacher this past Wednesday, May 25, when we observed the death anniversary of that early medieval monk called the Venerable Bede. Bede died on May 25 in the year 735 CE. Thus it was that last Wednesday's rite of observing the feast day of the Venerable Bede converged with my veneration of my father on this first occasion of his death anniversary.

And so, following this convergence of disparate faith traditions, I experience a new "depth of height" in my African heritage Christianity. Of course we human beings are capable of enjoying multiple identities. So I carry this heightened depth of African heritage right alongside our Anglican heritage Christianity. Actually, all of us here have ethnic backgrounds that involve a deeper convergence of Christian faith with our people's native or indigenous faith traditions. Even in the case of the Venerable Bede we have a convergence with the indigenous faith traditions of the Irish or Celtic peoples that preceded their conversion to Christianity—on the one hand. On the other hand, as an English monk Bede inherited a Roman Catholic and Benedictine heritage in convergence with the Irish and Celtic background.

It is in connection with our Roman Catholic heritage that I conclude today's reflections on this Second Sunday after Pentecost. Perhaps the most salient or noteworthy tradition that I could highlight here today is one that connects with this particular Sunday's observance in the Roman Catholic Church. Everywhere today our Roman Catholic family of faith is observing the feast of *Corpus Christi*, or 'the Body and Blood of Christ.' But that feast also connects to my father's becoming ancestor because of the way in which his 'dooms of love' resulted in his life being poured-out like a libation of wine; poured-out as in our ancient African tradition of pouring libations to the ancestors. Among African Christians today that tradition is integrated with images of Jesus' life being poured out on the Cross. But all of us Christians share in that calling as disciples of Christ to become, as it is said, 'broken bread and poured out wine' for the life of the world. Thus pouring libations is an interfaith image, bridging many cultures ancient and contemporary: bridging Africa with traditions as far away as India, and ancient Roman with Hebrew or Jewish traditions.

Thus the apostle Paul himself evokes that interfaith tradition of pouring libations. In his letter to the Philippians, and in another letter to his disciple Timothy, he describes his life as a living libation:

even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. (Philippians 2:17; cf. 2 Timothy 4:6)

So how do we reconcile—Church family; how do we reconcile the convergence and divergence of traditions and scriptures that accumulate for us on this Second Sunday after Pentecost? On the one hand we have in our gospel context for today Jesus declaring,

“I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith” (Luke 7:9).

In an entirely different context we have the Paul declaring,

Even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed (Galatians 1:8).

Finally in a different context the apostle himself invokes that interfaith image:

Even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you (Philippians 2:17).

Let it be here, Church family, that there comes to our aid our Collect appointed for today in our Book of Common Prayer. And may the Lord come to my aid as I try to improvise that Collect in the following way:

O God, your never-failing providence sets in order all things both in heaven and earth—*both things that seem true and righteous to us and things that seem otherwise*: Put away from us, we entreat you, all hurtful things— *both things that seem true and righteous to us and things that seem otherwise*, and give us those things which are profitable for us — *both things that seem true and righteous to us and things that seem otherwise*; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. (Accessed 5/28/2016 at www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Pentecost/CProp4_RCL.html)

And I pray that prayer—

In the name of God: Our Creator, our Redeemer, and our Sanctifier. Amen.