

Lent 3 March 15, 2009

Reflection: Gentiles, Dogs and Other Outsiders (first preached in 2006, revised and updated). Rev. Heidi Koschzeck

I wonder what it would have been like to be a worshipper in the court of the Gentiles – the place where the Gospel lesson takes place. Imagine a huge outer court, full of tables piled with coins, and cages full of animals stinking of fear – fear, and other more *basic* substances. Hear the calls of the money-changers, offering the best rates; hear the bawling of the goats, the call of the doves, the chatter of the people around you. Now imagine, that this is the place you have come to worship. You are a gentile, a non-Jew, what is known as a God-fearer. You are a man or woman who has not made the final conversion to Judaism, but feel called by the God of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam. Something in this faith calls to you, and so, you have come to this most holy of places – the temple mount in Jerusalem. You have come, seeking a closeness with God, trying to find some answers to the questions stirring within you, some peace for the dis-ease that plagues your soul.

Instead, you find this: chaos, stench, confusion – the sounds and smells of the marketplace. Is God to be found in this place? Suddenly into the midst of this scene comes a man, dressed in the simple clothes of a peasant. He is surrounded by a small crowd of people, who seem eager to hear what he has to say. As the man enters the court, he stops, and a look of disgust travels over his face. What happens next is unexpected, to say the least. Grabbing a piece of rope from a table nearby, he begins to lay about him, swinging it like a whip and bringing tables and cages crashing down. Animals are running

everywhere – and so are the people! Birds, given their freedom, take to the skies, calling frantically. People scream and shout as the pandemonium grows. You hear the man shouting, too: “My house is to be a house of prayer; but you have made it a marketplace!” You don’t know what he means, exactly, but you respond to the outrage in his voice – that same sense of violated holiness that fills your heart with disgust is written all over his face.

You hear the clomping of marching footsteps and the jingle and creak of leather armour, and a squad of temple guards appears. You look around to see if you can spot the man, but he appears to have disappeared as quickly as he has appeared. In his wake, he leaves a pool of quiet: not silence – no – there has been too much chaos for silence – but there is a sense of wondering, of questioning, that was not there before – and a spreading quiet that begins to ease the knot in your chest. Beneath the occasional squeal of an animal being caught and re-caged, and the voices of moneychangers telling the guards what had happened, you feel a sense of quiet inside your chest – a quiet that touches something in you. This is what you came for – for the holiness that begins to grip you. You wish you knew who the man was, so you can thank him – but you do not know him, and will likely never see him again.

It is hard for us to imagine a system of worship like the one that was part of Jewish life in the first century. We cannot identify with spilled animal blood as a vehicle of religious expression; we cannot relate to the issues of idolatry and the reason Roman coins had to be changed to temple coins. We cannot understand the systems that were so much a part of Jewish life that they probably went unquestioned.

But we do know our own expectations and systems of worship. And we know when they are being upset – when something unexpected comes and shakes it all up. There was a story I came across a while back, told by United Church minister Sandra Severs:

A long time ago, when I was a seminary student, I attended an outdoor worship service with my classmates. It was orientation weekend and the presider that day was the professor of worship. I was somewhat worried about assuming the role of public worship leader, and therefore I was eager to see how he conducted the service, especially communion.

On that particular Sunday we received communion by intinction. As the Presider finished the Great Thanksgiving, we heard the familiar words of the liturgy, "This is my body, broken for you. As often as you do this, do it in remembrance of me." Invited to come forward, we made our way to the centre aisle, quietly standing in line to receive the bread and the cup.

Awaiting our turn, we noticed that a dog had joined the line. As we moved toward the presider, so did the dog. One step forward for the humans, one step forward for the dog. After receiving the elements I returned to my seat where I watched this procession of people and dog, waiting to see what would happen.

Finally, the last person went forward and received communion. The dog moved forward, sat down in front of the presider and looked up expectantly. After only a moment's hesitation, the presider reached down and handed the dog the loaf, and the dog ran away.

What's your initial reaction to that story? Is it amusement? Is it indignation, that the president would allow sacred things to be shared by an animal? Is it wonderment at an animal that seemed to understand something of the nature of what was happening in front of it?

There was a time when such a story would be greeted with universal condemnation – with a sense that the order of things had been violated, that something sacred had been sullied and made mock of. Perhaps the reaction would have been similar to that of the temple authorities on seeing their temple courtyard trashed by a wandering rabble-rouser. But I think stories like this are a bit like Jesus' actions in the temple: they show us that what we have taken for granted as the way things are, is not always the way God wants things to be.

This little story wakes us up to something important – to a sea change in our understanding of our relationship with God and with the rest of creation. A dog shares in the Lord's Supper – an animal is part of the communion of those who love God and share in Christ's blessing. This story returns us to the covenant God made with Noah and his family, and *with all living things* – that's the part we forget. We forget that God's first great promise was a bargain made with all of creation, to care for and protect it, and not to destroy it. And if you pay attention to the words of the section of the covenant God gave Moses and the people on Mt Sinai, you'll notice that there's something in there for the animals among us too. Did you catch it? When God talks about the importance of Sabbath rest, it is in reference to everyone: the head of the household, all the people of the household, the wife, the kids, the servants, the stranger who happens to be staying over, and yes – the animals. The ox and the donkey and the camel and the goat – they all get a rest too.

For centuries we human beings have assumed that the worship of God is only for human beings – and that the rest of creation is excluded from the special relationship God has with those who love and serve God. Well, maybe we should reconsider. Listen to the beginning of Psalm 19: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the vault of the sky declares God's handiwork. One day speaks to another, and night shares its knowledge with night... their sound goes out to all the lands, their words to the ends of the earth." It's poetic imagery, but it also says something about how creation responds to the goodness of God.

One Christmas morning, I drove from Shoal Lake down to my friends' place near Sidney, MB for Christmas dinner. After a terribly foggy night, the sun was bright in the sky, and the light was dazzling. As carols of joy and praise played on the radio, it felt like the sun and the snow and the sundogs bringing their bright colour to the sky were joining with those voices to sing God's praise. If I could have heard the birds that morning, I'm sure they would have been singing too.

You can call it poetic fancy, or you can attribute it to our tendency to subscribe human emotions to other living things. But the experience was real, just as the story of the dog who shared communion is real; just as the experience that inspired the Psalmist was real. Why should we assume that we are the only beings in all creation which have an awareness of the holy? Why should we assume that we are the only beings in all creation that have a relationship with God? We are created beings, just as the rocks and the trees and the sky and your pet goldfish are created; why should we exclude other parts of creation from the circle of Christian community?

More and more, we are becoming aware of the interconnectedness of all people and all things. That awareness should bring with it an awareness of our responsibility to all things. If I am connected to the water that flows through Goldstream Creek, then I am in part responsible for what happens to it. If I am connected to a woman in Darfur or a child in Indonesia, then I have a responsibility to make that connection as life-giving as possible. The wider the circle is drawn, the more we come to see our obligation to welcome one another, to care for one another, to respect and honour one another – and that includes non-human life.

There is a challenge found within the Scripture passages we have heard today – a challenge to widen the circle of our concern, to include strangers and foreigners, those who follow our religious code and those who do not, even those creatures who do not think or reason the way we do and yet are connected to the sacred and are part of the household of God.

I don't want to get overly sentimental about this, and I'm not advocating inviting dogs to church every Sunday – though I know dogs who behave better in church than some people! But if we return to that opening scene in the court of the Gentiles in Jerusalem, we can ask ourselves: what does it mean, that all of this commercial chaos took place in the area where only outsiders worshipped? Why there, and not in the areas where faithful Jews went to pray? What does that say about the care given to those outsiders?

Drawing from that scenario, and the other stories we have heard today, we can ask ourselves a few questions:

Does our worship and our daily witness exclude or include; does it affirm the value of all of humanity and all of creation, or does it assume that some of us are closer to God than others? Take those questions home with you this week. Amen.