

This is the weekend to kick off summer, right? There are pools opening and grills getting fired up. There are RVs and campers in every campground and national park. And the food! Hamburgers and hot dogs, watermelon and ice cream. This week school is over, and summer hasn't quite started, so it's time to celebrate, before summer camps and summer jobs start up on Tuesday. And we all have a favorite thing at the Memorial Day cookout, right? The thing we pile on the plate when we see it, because we've missed it, it's so good, or it's just what you were hoping someone else would bring to the potluck.

Food is one of those elemental things that can unite or divide us. Maybe you're gluten sensitive, or vegan, or allergic to shellfish. Food can be halal, or kosher, or fair-trade and often what we eat divides us from them. Think about Jesus today in this text from Luke. He has just delivered the sermon to beat all sermons, the sermon on the plain, Luke's version of the beatitudes, and after he finishes he shows up in Capernaum. And there is someone who needs him, the slave of a Roman centurion, the military commander of 100 soldiers. In essence, Jesus is being forced to practice what he just preached: Blessed are you the poor, and then this blessing is requested at the deathbed of a Gentile's slave. Notice this centurion, the ultimate outsider in some ways, knows who Jesus is, and send folks to ask for healing for his slave. This man who asks this knows what things divide him from Jesus. Gentile and Jew, employed by the Empire and oppressed by it, a soldier and a teacher. Jesus would have been made unclean by entering the home where this slave lay... And even despite the gulf, the centurion who wouldn't even presume to speak directly to Jesus, still asks, still indirectly begs for him saying, "But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed."

This could be an us/them situation for Jesus. Their food is strange, their music makes me uncomfortable, and his employer, who gives him that authority he speaks of, is, has a food on the neck of my people, crushing them under oppression and violence. And yet Jesus is amazed. Not by the synagogue he had built, or the groups who come to entreat Jesus in his name, but by this man's faith. This sinner, this wielder of a sword, this impure Gentile, is the one who recognizes Jesus and it is his faith, not anything Jesus says, no touch of healing, no presence at the bedside, that brings the slave back to wholeness. And the strange thing is, we don't know what it was like in that home after the faith crosses the distance and suddenly there is a slave who was made well. Jesus doesn't go see and Luke doesn't tell us. We are left to wonder if that healing-transmitted-by-faith disrupted or maintained the systems in the centurion's household.

So where does this healing in one gospel leave us today, two millennia later? What does Luke's word to his community of believers say to this one here and now? Luke was very concerned with who was placed at the margins of society and over and over again Jesus goes to those edges and make his home with the poor, the hungry, the

weeping, and the excluded. Jesus finds the faith of the man who could have been his enemy astounding and healing reaches to the one who was on the side of too many cultural and societal boundaries. We have boundaries aplenty here and now just like first century Palestine.

So let's take that to our food conversation at the start. When I say "Lutheran" what are some food choices that come to mind? Lutefisk? Jello salads? Hot dish? One of the first questions that Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton asks when she's asking about the future of the ELCA is: "What is distinctive about our identity as a Lutheran church?" There is thing happening in our church, where people are rejecting the idea that Lutheran means only white, Midwestern, and of Scandinavian or German descent. Those categories might apply to a lot of us here, but that's because as a denomination, we are 96% white, the whitest mainline Protestant denomination in the country. But being Lutheran is bigger than that sad statistic. I'm going to quote from Elle Dowd, who is a candidate for ordained ministry in this ELCA:

*"Lutheranism is not an ethnicity. And our greatest gifts to the world are not our cultural identity markers of things like cuisine and (tired) jokes. Our greatest gifts to the world as Lutherans is our theology. Our recognition of human beings as simultaneously sinner and saint. Our insistence on justification through grace. Our theology of the cross. Our focus on the Gospel. Our history of speaking truth to power. These things transcend Scandinavian or German heritage. They belong to all of God's people. Lutheranism is bigger than us, white people, and we are not the boss of it."*

So to go back to food again, Pastor Paul Bailie who serves in Texas right at the border made this meme. Does everyone know what a meme is? It's a social media graphic that usually can be repeated with variation to make a point. Pastor Bailie made this one: "You might be a Lutheran if your VBS snack is tostadas." Sort of tips the ethnicity of Lutherans on its head, right?The meme caught on, from funeral luncheons with greens and fried chicken, to roasted goat or crabs at a potluck, to Sunday brunch of dim sum or with Ethiopian bread called injera. And a hashtag, a digital bookmark, was placed alongside one of these memes #decolonizeLutheranism. That's saying what Elle said: Lutheran is not an ethnicity, and we who have made our ethnicity the center of this church need to not only look at what that means, but do something about it. We need to ask the question: Who is on the margins? How can we center their struggle? In other words, how do we be like Jesus in this church he made with his very body? Where has our way been the only way? Where has our identity pushed out all others?

I don't have the answers, but I do have the confidence in Jesus that he's the same today as he was when he rolled into Capernaum. He is the one who blesses the poor

and is amazed at his enemy's faith. We know there is good stuff here, the word, the wine, the bread, the community, the welcome, but it's not ours. We are mere recipients, passing the plate along to the next outstretched hand at the potluck. Christ the Lord, Jesus of Nazareth has orchestrated this feast and has the best seats set aside, not for you or me, but the one with no power in leadership, council, or committees, who has no idea what lefse is, and who couldn't identify Martin Luther in a lineup if they had to. Those are the ones who we at least might see as strangers and maybe even call our enemies, but they have astounding faith and Jesus sees it even when we turn our hearts back in on themselves. The good news is we don't do this work alone, the Holy Spirit is helping us to see with Jesus' eyes, to open our clenched hands more swiftly, and to scooch over a little more for one more guest at the heavenly banquet set for us all who stake our identity to Christ.