

Sunday, August 29, 2010 – The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 14:1, 7-14

This I Believe

This past Wednesday Cheryl and I sat on our deck and watched the full moon rise. I have always been deeply moved by the rising of the moon. This evening I was not disappointed. Later as I walked Carter on our well worn path the air was filled with the scent of blackberries and we were followed by Cat Steven's "Moon Shadow". As the sky darkened and the stars slowly began to come into view, I stopped to take in the wonder of God's universe. The stars that I stood watching are thousands and in some cases millions of light years away. Today we understand our universe as being billions of years old and billions and billions of light years across. We are living in a vast and ever expanding universe. As I stand looking up I am touched by the presence of God who created the wonder that unfolds before me.

Fixed in that brief moment of time it is not difficult to imagine a young shepherd boy watching the same moon rising over the Judean hills. His universe and his image of God were much different than ours today. They were much smaller. He did not think of God as creator of the universe because his universe consisted of the people of Israel and the land they occupied. It was God's protective presence that provided security, not only for the shepherd boy in the dark of night, but for the whole of the nation of Israel. There is little wonder that the people understood God as smiling on and at times demanding the wholesale slaughter of their enemies. They felt that other people did not count in the eyes of God; other people were not a part of God's universe.

Years later a young man walked along the canals of Babylon the same full moon casting his shadow across the waters. His feelings of God could no longer be contained by the walls of a destroyed Temple. Something had happened to him. His life had been shattered by the destruction of Jerusalem, all of his easy answers swept away. So many of the people wanted to go back to the way things had been as if nothing had happened. He could not. In the midst of his despair, God grabbed hold of him and would not let him loose. Emptied of his pride he began to be open to God's presence in a new way. God was so much greater than anything he had previously been able to imagine.

As his world expanded, so had his experience of God expanded. God was not God of a nation; God was the God of the universe. God cared about all nations and peoples. It is one thing to think that God created the world, and because of that, God cares about all the people and creatures of that world. It is something quite different to say it. Who wants to hear that God cares as much about the stranger as God cares about me? That kind of thinking asks too much. When the people returned to Jerusalem they could not forget about what the young man has said. If he had been right, God would no longer fit in the temple, God could no longer be contained by the nation of Israel. They buried his writings in the Book of Isaiah. Maybe the people would forget.

Then the leaders began to set about getting rid of all the undesirables: the sick, poor, mixed race, foreigners, anyone of a questionable background. Obviously, God was not big enough to care about everyone.

He had gone off by himself to pray. Slowly the light of the full moon cast its light across the hills of Galilee. He knew that every person touched by the light of God's creation was valued by God. If only they knew how deeply God cared about them. Why was it so difficult for people to listen? For some people their lives were so filled with the ridicule and rejection they had received all their lives that there was little room for God's presence. Time and again they were told that God was not big enough to accept them. In their despair they cried out to him and he healed them. He healed them not simply of their physical deformity and disease, but also of their spiritual hunger. God was with them; God cared about them.

Other people were so full of their own self importance that there was little room for God's presence in their lives. This past week I read a prayer that said something to the effect that God did not listen to the requests of the proud. I took great exception to that prayer. God listens to the requests of everyone no matter who they are or what their situation. Remember the story of the rich young man who came to Jesus seeking assurance of eternal life. Jesus loved him and offered him the life he was seeking. He turned his back and walked away. There were too many things that got in the way of his receiving the offer of God's presence. Some people are not open to God's answer. This morning's reading from Luke tells of Jesus' observation of how people sat in the places of honor at a sabbath dinner. Jesus was not running an etiquette column in the local news paper. He was making a statement about our standing before God. It is never based on our presumed position of importance, or lack of importance. We have to empty ourselves of all the clutter that gets in the way of being open to God's presence. We also have to empty ourselves of our sense of superiority. We never get to determine who God is able to accept.

God is constantly drawing us beyond ourselves; drawing us beyond everything we felt possible. Little more than five hundred years ago the earth was flat, heaven was above and hell below and the sun revolved around the earth in its prescribed orbit. God in the eyes of many people was even smaller than his universe. Tonight as you stand in the light of a waning moon look at the stars and think of the billions of stars the stretch out before you. God created the universe in all of its breath and wonder. There is room in God's love for everyone. We have not been given the task of deciding who can sit at the table. We are the servants sent out into the streets to make sure that everyone is invited. Amen.

Dennis Hartsook, Pastor
Trinity Lutheran Church