

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
June 20, 2010
"The Courage to Follow"
Saint Luke 8:26-39

"Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you!" So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him." St. Luke 8:39

A volunteer at a homeless shelter turns to a fellow volunteer and whispers:

"I'm two paychecks from being here, too!" That may have been an exaggeration, but he is also speaking the truth.

Could it be that those who are homeless or mentally ill are either avoided or feared because being with them is a reminder that 'they' could be 'us.'

The story in the gospel reading this morning tells about Jesus who enters into fear. Jesus wades deep into the chaos and brings healing and change.

It will help to step into the first century to get the jest of this story. Rome is for the most part a tyrannical power. Rome oppresses the local population to keep them in line. Rome rules by fear. Imagine seeing punishment met out on others in the form of crucifixion. The Roman army was the army of occupation taking away the voice and self control of the whole nation. Who would dare cross the Empire?

Distinctions are very important in the first century. Women inhabit the interior domestic world – men are in power in the public world where decisions are made. If you were born into a lower class you usually remained in a lower class.

The distinction between slave and free was essential to the political and economic structure of the first century. The line between Jew and Gentile was crucial to the Jewish identity and the bedrock for the religious and political structure of Palestine.

Given that context we hear this story not just as a healing miracle, but a faith-filled stance in the face of oppression.

As we journey with Jesus we see him going off to the extreme. He leads his followers across the Sea of Galilee – out of Jewish territory and into an unclean land of pigs and death.

Lest we forget the purity laws would not allow such a trip. It would make one impure to enter Gentile territory – much less go into a graveyard and touch a naked crazy man. Besides all that the main livelihood of the local population was raising swine. Pigs are not kosher and for a group of Hebrew follower of Jesus – this represents the most extreme place Jesus could take them.

There are layers of impurity – death, pigs, crazy man, nudity, Gentile territory, tombs.

It is a fearful place – impure and simply scary!

Jesus is making a political and cultural statement by taking his followers into such a situation: The man's name is 'Legion' – which is a term for Rome describing 6,000 troops. The pigs forbidden by the Jews were sold to feed the Roman army.

What irony! Jesus takes on the tyranny of Rome and the exclusion of the purity laws in one fell swoop!

You can get the picture now maybe why Jesus got into so much trouble. This story flies in the face of Roman authority and Jewish purity laws – two major reasons why Christ was put to death.

This is not merely a miracle story, but a commentary on Rome. Jesus commands the Empire to leave – he exorcises Rome and restores the whole community of the Gerasenes to their right mind.

Saint Luke is telling us that the new world that Jesus brings offers both personal and political transformation. Christ enters the chaos and fear and brings healing and new life.

The world of 'Legion' this possessed man is so chaotic that he hears 6,000 voices – these drives him out of his clothes, out of his house, out of his community, out of his mind. A danger to himself and others he is in chains among the tombs. He is a zombie – the living dead!

What a traumatic situation! Jesus takes the disciples to this extreme place and he calls them to follow him into the fear. Such a disturbing story, yet, a story of radical grace!

Are we able to identify the chaotic land of the Gerasenes in our lives?

Are there places we just as soon would avoid and not enter?
What in your life are you facing that you fear? What drives
you to your limits and beyond?

Never enough? "I can never do enough for my children, my
family, my spouse?"

"I'm never good enough!"

Do you have those voices ringing in your ears?

A young person comes home from school and says,
"I'm stupid!"

"Who told you that?" ask the parents.

"Oh! I did badly on a test and the kids call me stupid."

Sounds like a small thing, but if those voices take root and
become amplified they can shape a young person's life.

What land of Gerasenes are you entering? Are the demons of
disease making a home in your head? Cancer plagues a
relative or friend. What are your inner voices saying?

Fear – there is fear within.

The risen Christ calls us to follow him into the fear. Christ
journeys with us into the fear and the Spirit gives us courage
to follow.

Where you find yourself unacceptable, God has accepted you.
Even if in your heart of hearts you find yourself unacceptable
– God is more generous than we are, and to realize and
accept that is to know grace.

'Legion' comes to know such radical grace.

The reality is that we are all trapped in our own tombs, far
from the light of Christ. Jesus calls us to follow him and the
Holy Spirit gives us courage to enter these places of fear.

Through the cross Christ has entered our deepest fear and
takes us by the hand and calls us by name. Christ leads us
back to wholeness and back into community.

The courage to follow comes out of the dynamic love of Christ
who journeys with us and will not abandon us in our deepest
need.

When we come to know such acceptance, we are compelled to follow – even with hesitation – even not knowing – to the land of the Gerasenes in our own community.

Once accepted by God's grace it is easy for us to still turn inward and leave the broken and vulnerable in versions of their own tombs. How often do we accommodate the demons that live at the edge of our town?

- Bars and saloons promise pleasure and friendship, but deliver brokenness and want.
- Crack houses destroy whole neighborhoods, but they don't worry us unless they are our neighbors.
- Casinos promise money for education, so we ignore the crime and poverty that follow in their wake.
- We drive by the homeless and the demon-possessed and try not to notice.
- We often close our eyes to the broken families and aimless kids that dwell all around us and on every side.

It takes courage – the gift of the Spirit – to follow Jesus into such disturbing places. And God has given to us that Spirit here and now.

At the conclusion of this gospel story, Jesus sends the healed man away saying to him, "Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you!"

At the conclusion of worship we are dismissed with: "Go in peace. Serve the Lord!" or "Go in peace. Remember the poor!" As we leave worship today will we go like the healed man who went away "proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him"?

We, too, have been given great and wonderful gifts from God. How will we as individuals and as a congregation live out those words this week?

Amen

Sources for this sermon include the following:

Day Resource: Lectionary 12 from Sundays and Seasons – online

Sermon Nuggets by Lyndy Dale – www.textweek.com

The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus: What's So Good about the Good New?

by Peter J Gomes – p. 239