

Sermon: Liberating love
2 Pentecost, Year C
Luke 8:26-39

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Sometimes we come to church seeking peace and comfort. If that was the case for you today, this is not your day! Our gospel writer Luke calls us out of the hum drum of the status quo into the upheaval of God's liberating love. If you were hoping for a word of comfort, you might be disappointed, because the peace won't come until you go through some Spirit-inspired trouble. Today's passage is a bumpy ride; it is disruptive, interruptive and truly unsettling before it becomes anything else.

Luke tells us Jesus stepped out of a boat on to the land of the Gerasenes, which is across the sea from Galilee. Luke tells us this is the one time Jesus goes deliberately into Gentile territory. Here he steps out into different territory to confront evil. He finds a man who is possessed by demons, naked, and living in the tombs. He is out of control, literally living among the dead. He is suffering and yet the demons within him recognize Jesus. He shouts at the top of his voice, "Jesus, Son of the Most High God, what have you to do with me? I beg you, do not torment me." It was believed that knowing someone's name gave one power over that person. And in a scene that is all too strange for our 21st c. ears, Jesus calls the legion of demons to come out of the man, and allows them to go into herd of swine that were nearby. The swine race down the hill and drown in the lake.

While it certainly raises questions for us such as "why would the demons be transferred to the swine?", and "why did the swine run toward the water, where it was thought demons could not live?" and "what about demons anyway, do we believe in them?" "Was the man demon-possessed or, as our current sensibilities might lead us to ask, "Perhaps he was mentally ill?" However we choose to answer those questions, we can glean from this passage that wherever Jesus is, there is no accommodation for the powers of evil. Jesus' aim is always compassion and healing. For him to have stepped out into Gentile territory to a man who was "unclean" tells us that no one is beyond the reach of God's healing love. Jesus sought out this man who was suffering to liberate him, to bring him healing in mind, body, spirit and in relationships.

Today I want to name one affliction that we in this country have had and are still facing - the evil and systemic sin of racism. In August the country will mark the 400th anniversary of black Africans being sold into slavery in North America, through Jamestown. For any of us who think that we are past racial injustice and that we just need to move forward without looking back or without looking at our current situation, we need to look again. There are too many examples where racial injustice permeates our life - in educational, economic, and social opportunities as well as racial disparities in incarceration. To help us understand the present, we must learn our past.

Some of you may be surprised to learn that in the 1830's there was a Slave Trail of Tears that went right down the Shenandoah Valley, right by Staunton on the Valley Turnpike, which is now Route 11. *One million* shackled black slaves were forced to walk from Alexandria into the deep south, some as far as Louisiana, as part of a vast economic enterprise. Families were often broken up, many got sick and died along the way.¹ Our diocese will be marking the 400th anniversary of racial injustice on August 17th by having a pilgrimage starting here in Staunton going all the way to Abingdon, with prayers, readings and singing, in several towns along the way. You could call it a "Rolling Lament", where we have the opportunity to look at our past, lament the injustices and move ahead with God's grace. Other dioceses in the Episcopal Church will be marking this time in other ways. I hope you all will be able to be present for the gathering here in Staunton that day. More information will be coming.

¹ Smithsonian Magazine, November, 2015. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/slavery-trail-of-tears-180956968/>

The good news is that God gives us the tools to combat racism. We must step out of the boat of complacency and read, and listen to the black folks in our own community. In local author Laten Bechtel's book "In Their Words" she shares the stories of thirty local older black people, some of whom you may know. They tell of their lives before, during and after the Civil Rights movement. The running themes include their having limited educational opportunities. Many recalled having to use the old and worn, hand-me-down text books cast off from the white schools. They told of how jobs were very limited. For men, they could be janitors or farmers. The women were often limited to being domestic helpers or teachers in black schools. They told of how they couldn't sit down in restaurants but could order from the back door. They couldn't access Gypsy Hill Park, except one day per year. And the day after that, the city drained the pool.

Our society, where everyone was supposedly created equal, was fundamentally and systemically unequal. Right here in these United States of America, liberty, equality and opportunity were based on skin color. The result was one denigrating situation after another. And a common refrain throughout the book was, "We just knew there were some things we couldn't do. That's just the way it was." There was a quiet and grace-filled dignity in that acceptance, but I wonder how many of us who have been more privileged would accept such outrageous treatment? We need to know these stories, we need to ask more questions about what it is like to be black in Staunton today. We need to listen and learn. We need to unearth our more complete history.

To walk the way of Jesus means to get out of the boat of complacency and to reach out to the underserved black community right in our midst and in doing so, to possibly bring healing not only to them but to our own deprived souls. We need each other, black and white, in order for us to be a vibrant and more whole community. I wish I could say that in our striving for racial justice, that everyone would respond with affirmation, but they probably won't! Note that when the demon possessed man in the tomb was healed and made whole, many around him, who you think would be amazed, thankful and joyful, instead, said to Jesus, "please leave!" This act of healing was disruptive to their world. When they lost their herd of swine, leaving them economically challenged, they responded in fear instead of faith. Jesus' presence caused upheaval! It unsettled their economic and social world. What might appear to be good news to the reader, to us and certainly to the man in the tombs, was not good news for everyone. The outcome was NOT welcomed by all. So we shouldn't be surprised when we are criticized for working toward racial reconciliation.

But we do the right thing anyway, come what may, because it is the right thing. It is the way of Jesus. So step out of the boat of complacency. Accept the bumpy, disruptive ride that it might be. Allow God to speak to and through *you* that racial injustice might truly become a thing of the past. Let's give up the hum drum of the status quo and embrace the upheaval of God's liberating love!

Amen.

Thanks to the ideas of Elaine Heath, p.166-170, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3 Bartlett/Brown, editors