

“A BROADER HEALING”

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, June 19, 2016

Text: Luke 8:26-39

I have always thought of this as a magnificent story about how Jesus healed an utterly ruined person. This is not a sick man whose family is caring for him, or a leper who hangs out with other lepers. This man is deranged and dangerous, unable to live at home, banished alone to the wilds. Animals and tombs are his companions. Jesus casts out many demons from inside him (very dramatically—into the pigs), sets him down, gets him some clothing, and sends him home in his right mind.

It is a comprehensive, deep healing. Not only is the man restored to his “right mind,” but he is put together physically and relocated to his home, presumably his family. What a lucky person to have met Jesus!

All these years (and I have probably preached on this ten or fifteen times) I have always considered the bystanders to be a sort of Greek chorus who provide reaction. They witness the healing, they express amazement, they ask Jesus to leave, and so on. But all those people, and by extension the people of Gerasa, I figured, were just witnesses. Like you and me.

But now I don’t think so. Thinking about this story this week, in the aftermath of the horrors of Orlando, I noticed that this healing is not only deep, it is broad. I think Jesus in this story is healing society. Perhaps even civilization.

Location is everything in this story. The author distinguishes clearly between the city, the country, and the wilds. The man is “of the city.” But he has been relegated to “the wilds,” the place where there “is nothing”—that is what the Greek means.

This violent man has been thrown out of the city. First they tried to restrain him, but they could not, so they expelled him from the city, all the way to the other extreme, the wilderness. In the process, he lost the tokens of civilization. He is naked and doesn’t live in a house. He has become like a wild animal, or like the dead people in the tombs which are his haunt.

So this story begins not merely with a man who has a personal problem, but with a breakdown of civilization which comes to light when Jesus goes to another country and finds civilization’s discard pile. This is a political breakdown. (Keep in mind that the word civilization is built on the Latin for city or town; the word political is built on the corresponding Greek word for city or town.)

And how does the story conclude? Not with some man saying “I feel so much better,” or with Jesus acquiring another follower. The end of the story is also not the pigs rushing down the slope. The story ends when Jesus sends the man back to town. “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.

He had to think Jesus was kidding, at first. “Go back where they used to keep me in chains? Go back to my family, who lived in terror because of me? For whom peace meant getting rid of me so they could get some sleep finally? Are you kidding, Jesus?” But Jesus was right. Jesus was doing what needed to be done. And when the man returns home, then he is healed. And not only him, but his family, his neighborhood, his city.

I think this is actually the main thrust of this healing story. Society is damaged whenever people hurt people, and then it gets even more torn up when its apparently dangerous people are incarcerated or exiled or killed. Society is only truly healed when those people who threaten our safety come home praising God. And we may also say that the world is healed, in this story, when the border is crossed in the name of peace and people are made whole. When fear is cast out.

So Luke's story begins with a wounded city, officially represented by its lost soul. And it ends with a city restored because he returns home.

But it is actually the middle of the story that convinced me this story is about the healing of society. The middle, where Jesus talks with the man who is out of his mind and out of his place and out of his clothes. Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion," for many demons had entered him.

I may be wrong, but my hunch is that this man had many demons because, and I don't mean this in a very literal way but in a symbolic way, this man possessed the demons which the whole city had heaped on him. He had become a scapegoat for the demons of the city. There was so much wrong with the city that they had solved it by putting all their troubles on him and getting rid of him. The city was safe, now he was gone.

In the book of Leviticus provision is made for an act of atonement which involved putting all the people's sins on the head of a goat and sending it into the wilds. It reads like this:

Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear

on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.

I think that in this story Jesus, who came to die for the sins of the world, went into the wilderness and located the goat, the scapegoat of the world, and set it free. This man named Legion, set free in the wilderness, I think fulfills the commandment of Leviticus in a sweetly unexpected way—he is the goat which is set free in the wilderness, and then sent back to the city, redeeming thereby the men, women, and children of his home city.

Jesus is the light of the world. Through his mercy, by his gift of himself for the sins and sicknesses of the world, he redeems the utterly hopeless. Not only individuals, but the whole of us.

When we think humanly, politically, that any other people are the reason the world is dark, we are not right. The sin inside ourselves means we all deserve to be living in the wilds, naked, among tombstones. Only when Jesus casts out our inhumanity do we regain our humanity. Only in the peace of our merciful savior can we stop coming up with solutions that are worse than our problems.

If we ever think we will be safe if we can just get enough distance from anyone, or if we can put someone away, far away—we deceive ourselves; and we are not thinking like our Lord. Not until Jesus makes us one with each other do we have true peace.

This is not a counsel of despair. Jesus has come. What he did for the man named Legion he did for all of us by his death on the cross. Just as the pigs absorbed the demons of the man named Legion, so Jesus himself has absorbed our sins and the sins of all who believe in him. He has set us down and clothed us in his righteousness. He feeds us a simple meal, and he sends us back home with a simple job.

“Go and tell people what God can do with his love. Tell them how he healed a city, how he put a family together.” And not just one family. Go tell them there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Amen.

