

Pentecost 5C, Proper 7. June 19, 2016. Gal. 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39.

Wednesday night at Oak Park's interfaith vigil in response to the massacre at the Pulse club in Orlando, a friend of mine was assigned to close the program. And faced with that task, she said something that I think was very wise. She said: one of the uses of scripture is to speak for us, when we don't know what to say. How can we possibly know what to say after a week like this? It was a week in which dozens of doubly marginalized queer people of color were murdered while out dancing with friends, in a place that has often been the safest place to be lesbian, gay, bi, trans, or queer. It was a week in which the invisible daily violence against queer bodies was concentrated into one horrific act of terrible visibility. A week in which thousands of folks who had started to feel relatively safe were shown undeniably that they are not. A week in which many of us straight folks saw what horrors our apathy and ambivalence contribute to.

I have few illusions about the ability of one sermon to heal, renew, energize, encourage, and convince, all of which are called for today. For most of those tasks, I commend to you not only the words of scripture, as my friend Lindsey suggests, but also the content of our liturgy: the confession of sin, where we repent of the things that we have done and the things that we have left undone; the prayers of the people, when we speak before God the names of those who are persecuted, those with authority to make changes, and those who have died; the Peace, in which we try to live in microcosm that peace that God is bringing to the world through our inadequate but holy hands and mouths; the Eucharist, in which (in the words of S. Augustine) we eat what we are, so that we might become what we receive; and the post-communion prayer, in which we are sent out into the world to do the work of who we are: the work of the church, the work of the body of Christ, the work of the friends of God.

And so I invite you before all else to live fully into the liturgy today—trust these words to say what you need to say, to God, to each other, to yourself, and to the world. But what is *scripture* helping us say today? The question these texts press upon me is how do we respond to a God who refuses to be deterred by the divisions by which we organize and understand our world. What do we do as followers of a God who dares to see us—all of humanity—as one people, each of us equally drenched in divine love, whether we acknowledge it or not?

Paul is writing to the church in Galatia, which has fault lines running through it according to several kinds of status. Jews who are the chosen people and Greeks, the sophisticated, powerful people. Slaves and free folks, men and women, the powerful and the weak, the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the well-intentioned and the malicious. Black and white and brown. Straight and queer. When Paul says that these distinctions are no longer, I don't think that he means that we are all identical. I think he means that these identities and diversities have no status to rank us before God. It's not that God doesn't care whether or not we are enslaved or about our gender identities—it is that God's love for each and all of us is not for a moment impeded by any of these identities or our human attempts to classify, identify, and rank. There are no degrees in God's love: it is relentlessly and indiscriminately lavished on all of us.

That sounds great, right? It sounds great and comfortable and . . . banal. Here we come to the meat of it. It sounds like because God's love for us is unconditional, we don't have to do anything to earn it. This is true. The joyful news is that God's love for you

depends on nothing but God. Society's view, how lucky you've been, how talented you are, how good you are, whether or not you agree with the preacher, how the church has treated you—all are irrelevant to the tenacity of God's love for you. It is not necessarily first God's love for us that makes claims on us—it is first God's equal love for others that calls us out of complacency and, for those of us who are powerful and relatively safe, into risk. God loving me is easy for me—it is being loved by a God who equally loves other folks that calls me into discipleship.

Let's talk about Jesus and the Gerasene demoniac. Don't be distracted by the demons—what matters is that this guy is utterly and completely cut off from his community. Luke tells us nothing about how the demons got ahold of him or why this happened. It is irrelevant. What matters is that he is untouchable, and especially to an observant Jew. Gerasa was a Gentile city, no place for an observant Jew. This guy is filled with demons, no company for a pious person. He lives in the tombs, among the dead, which makes him ritually unclean in the Temple religion of the day. He's a danger to himself and others, so they keep him chained up and cut off from the living.

Now, here's the thing. The part of the story that we didn't read this morning is how Jesus and his friends got there. They leave home base in Galilee without an explanation and sail across the lake to Gerasa through the night. On the way, a storm comes up and is going to kill all of them until Jesus calms the storm. They get off the boat, meet this naked guy in chains, Jesus delivers him, and then the people of the town are terrified and ask them to leave and they do. Luke doesn't tell us why Jesus wanted to go to Gerasa and all he does there is save this guy and then leave. I invite you into the possibility that Jesus did exactly what he intended to do in Gerasa—that he risked his own life and those of his friends crossing the lake in a storm at night precisely so that he could save this one outcast.

This is what it means to us for God to love other people as much as God loves us. It means that to follow a God who dares to see us as one people, equally loved, involves putting our very lives at risk to participate in God's liberation of those in chains. In other words, there is no fee for God's love for us, but participating in God's love for others costs us something.

How happy is the ending of this story in Luke? God's love for those whom society doesn't love puts us in an awkward position. The salvation of all does not have universal appeal. People don't applaud the healing of this man—they respond by asking Jesus and his disciples to leave. Proclaiming the love of God for all is not some sappy, sentimental, toothless liberal bromide—it is the fiercest thing we can proclaim and it won't be popular or easy.

We have been confronted this week by horrible evil. That evil cannot be undone. Scripture this week is inviting us to respond by allowing ourselves also to be confronted by the gently persistent, never ceasing, unlimited love of God. In time, that love for us will drive us toward healing; and that love for others will drive us into real, costly sacrifice to change this world, to build it into a world that finally will accept and delight in the love of God.