

Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, June 19, 2016
Text: Luke 8:26-39



First United
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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Last Sunday as we gathered to worship here in the sanctuary, police officers in Orlando were trying to make sense of a mass murder at a night club. Very quickly news commentators and politicians began to offer their perspectives, and in some cases, prejudices; during the week many more opinions have been offered.

I share with you a Monday morning observation written by Sarah Kendzior, who is our daughter-in-law. She is an on-line commentator for “The Globe and Mail,” a national newspaper in Canada, as well as for “The Guardian,” “Quartz,” “Foreign Policy,” and “Slate.” She comments on how tired President Obama looked on Sunday afternoon when he proclaimed the shooting as “an act of terror and an act of hate.” After all, he has given this same speech fifteen times during his presidency. As our culture has grown more diverse, she writes, “Extremism has become mainstream, with election campaigns exposing and exacerbating racial divides. There is little that seems to hold America together -- until a mass shooting tears us apart.”

She points out how diverse the victims have been in recent years – Sikhs worshiping in their temple in Wisconsin, black churchgoers studying the Bible in South Carolina, moviegoers in Colorado, college students in Oregon and California, office workers in California, and elementary school children in Connecticut. She concludes, “America is a diverse nation . . . , yes, diverse in our death toll, but united in our frustration and fear.”

She says that the Orlando killer allegedly was a member of the Islamic State, but he did his crime the American way: with a gun, indiscriminately, targeting a marginalized group in a public space – in this case, a predominantly Latino LGBT community.” Then, she adds this shrewd observation about the conundrum facing opportunistic politicians: “The shooter is Muslim, the victims Latinos at a gay club – how do you demonize for the greatest gain?”

Yes, demons – who are the demons and how do we exploit them rather than deal with them? That is the current partisan question. We here in the Church, we who strive to be people of faith, specifically as disciples of Jesus Christ, cannot let ourselves off that easily. It is our calling to confront all that is demonic, around us and within us.

I admit that it makes me uncomfortable to talk about demons; I do not believe in their existence, at least, not in the old-fashioned way of foreign entities that invade our bodies and minds and take over. I am too well-schooled in psychology and social theory to assign all of our problems to “the other” that possesses us.

And yet, I spent two hours on Thursday listening to a woman report that she is the victim of a demonic take-over by Jewish and Roman Catholic forces that have been bedeviling her family for years, keeping them without work, money, and housing, and that she is routinely threatened by actor Anthony Hopkins, who recreates his role as “Hannibal Lecter” in her mind, the serial killer in novels by Thomas Harris. And there was no way that I could convince her that it was all in her imagination.

And, as if the shooting in Orlando and this woman’s testimony were not enough to stoke our fear of what evil forces there are in the world, today the lectionary cycle of gospel readings delivers to us the episode of Jesus casting out demons from the wild man living among the Gerasenes.

Jesus and the disciples sail to the east side of the Sea of Galilee. That Gentile territory was much less domesticated than Galilee on the west side, a Gentile region; it still is that way today, with different clans living up in the hills along the borders with Jordan and with Syria. They are met at the shore by a man well known for being possessed by demons, so many, in fact, that when Jesus asks him his name, he says that it is “Legion.” It is a word we know as referring to many combatants; a “foreign legion” had taken over his identity and driven him crazy, forcing him to live in the graveyard, often naked, shrieking and falling down, sometimes restrained by leg irons and chains, but often breaking loose and intimidating the local residents. He clearly is “the other” with whom no one wants to deal, people keeping their distance out of fear.

Well, as Luke tells it, the demons themselves negotiate a deal with Jesus. “You can expel us from the man, but do not send us to the abyss where demons die; instead, transfer us to that herd of pigs over there.” That sounds strange to us, but pigs were deemed as unclean, and so were the demons, so the combination makes sense, except to the Gentile owners of the pigs. And in the end Jesus outwits the evil forces because the possessed pigs run off a cliff, drown in the sea, and the demons die, anyway.

But the focus of the occurrence is not on the pigs but on the man freed from what possessed him, the man now fully clothed, calm, clean, and sitting at Jesus’ feet. People from all over the region come to take a look at him as they have never seen him before, in his right mind, and they are amazed. But, watch this: what do they do? Instead of praising Jesus, they ask him to leave because they are afraid of him. Sometimes it is more comfortable for us to live with our fears

than to live through changes for the better. For our nation to become safe we must have the courage to make changes, which will bring us into closer proximity with “the other,” the stranger in our midst whom we fear most.

Madeleine L’Engle, the author of over forty books, the best known being **A Wrinkle in Time**, wrote a beautiful book for children about the Christmas story, entitled **The Glorious Impossible**. I heard her talking with a group of children about the task of writing a book and admitting that she often had a hard time starting because she was afraid. “What if I do not have something to say? What if it is not any good?” She said, “I sit down at the desk in the morning, and I sharpen twenty pencils . . . I don’t write with pencils,” she confessed, “but it is a way of stalling for just a few minutes longer.”

That inherent fear of writing, something with which many of us can identify, might have given rise to her central theme of her version of the Christmas story. The birth of Jesus is God’s way of saying, “Fear not!” The angel Gabriel says to Mary, a 14-year old girl engaged to Joseph, “Fear not!” The angel says to the shepherds hearing the heavenly cantata as they tend their sheep on the hillside above the town of Bethlehem, “Fear not!” The angel instructs Joseph to whisk Mary and the baby Jesus away to Egypt, but assures him, “Fear not!” And after Herod’s death when it becomes time for Joseph to return with the family to Galilee, again the angel declares, “Fear not!” It is right there in the story, Madeleine L’Engle points out to the children, and that is Jesus’ message to the disciples over and over again, “Fear not!” And that is God’s essential call to all of us who strive to be faithful in a threatening world, “Fear not!”

“Fear insulates the conscience against a sense of wrongdoing,” said the great pastor and theologian Howard Thurman. The only way to live faithfully is to “fear not” and make “the other” one of our own family. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but when we look through the lens of Jesus we see that we all are one in God’s expansive, inclusive family,” even those who do not look through that same lens, I am obliged to assure my gay Muslim friend, Malik.

When I grew up in Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, my world was pretty small. So was Menomonee Falls in those days – one square mile, one stop light, 2000 residents, and no loud-talking automobile dealer. Mainly, it was Roman Catholic and Protestant, the kids who went to St. Mary’s Grade School and those who went to Lincoln Public School. In high school in Mundelein, Illinois, my world expanded to include Latinos, though we did not have that term in our vocabulary. Here at the University of Wisconsin I interacted with Jews for the first time. When I went to seminary I studied with black students for the first time.

When I entered the United Methodist itineracy as a minister my world got much bigger. In Apple River I was immersed in the world of farmers. Talk about “the other”! It was a cross-cultural appointment for me. In Rockford I became acquainted with fundamentalists, some of them ferocious. At the University of Chicago “the other” that eventually became familiar were the academics. In Wilmette it was wealthy people. For decades I had thought that rich people were the problem in our society, and when I got to that upscale northern suburb of Chicago I made the artless mistake of telling the church trustees that I felt I had been “dropped behind enemy lines.” It was my fear of “the other” making me an idiot. I later confessed that I had never met so many faithful people with a will to make a difference and the power to do it than in that congregation. When I served on the Conference staff it was the diversity of the people served by our shared ministry that demythologized “the other” -- Native Americans, Serbian widows, Korean immigrants, and Puerto Ricans and Mexicans who spoke different dialects of Spanish, a subtlety lost to my insensitive ears. By the time I got to the Loop in Chicago, “the other” who soon became acquaintances were the poor who resided in the neighborhood, even if they had nowhere to call “home.”

The bigger our personal worlds become, the fewer people we can demonize. And the Church can be the door to open us up to God’s grand creation. If we are true to our calling here at First United Methodist Church, living up to our vision of who we sense God is calling us to become, then our world will be big enough to include Roman Catholics, and Latinos, and Jews, and Blacks, and farmers, and fundamentalists, and academics, and the rich, and the poor, and everybody else. And there will be no one left to be feared as “the other.”

My dear friend, Malik, who is a gay Muslim . . . someone said, “That is impossible; you cannot be both.” But I say, “Here he is, a glorious creation of God.” He said last week in a newspaper interview that the mass murder of predominantly gay Latinos by a self-identifying Muslim burdens him with guilt blended with sorrow. He said, “(We) Muslims pride ourselves on the ‘umma,’ the family. When someone from the family engages in an act, we are a part of it.” Malik suffers as a member of two “families” now as a gay Muslim.

He said that he continues to be a devout Muslim, praying several times a day, though he cannot attend the mosque in which he grew up because he is gay. He said that his husband, an Antiochian Orthodox Christian, cannot attend his church, either, because he is gay. What do they do in order to worship together? “We go to a Methodist church where we are welcome.”

Will miracles never cease? Not when love conquers hatred, not when familiarity embraces “the other” as among our very own, not when “our choices reflect our hopes, not our fears,” as Nelson Mandela put it. That is not a sweet thing to say, “When our choices reflect our hopes, not our fears;” it is a radical thing to say, a radicality that goes to the root of things and can change the world in spite of its resistance to change.

What happens to the man whom Jesus liberates from his demons? The man wants to jump in the boat with Jesus and become another disciple, but Jesus says, “No, go home and tell the people you know what God has done for you.”

My good friend, Robin Lovin, a wonderful ethicist who is an expert on Reinhold Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and a good United Methodist, as well, years ago served as the President of Drew Theological Seminary. I remember him saying to me, “Phil, half of the students belong here. They have some sense of being called by God and want to serve through the ministry of the Church. The other half have had some major change in their lives that they attribute to God, and the only way they think they can thank God is to go to seminary. When you have successful brain surgery, you do not give up everything and go to medical school to become a brain surgeon. No, you just return to your daily routine and thank God for your new lease on life.”

Jesus says to the man, “Do not go to seminary and hang out with these disciples. Go to the people you know best and tell them about God’s grace.”

How is God freeing us from our demons, our hatreds, our fears? How is God making “the other” our sister and our brother? How is God using the Church, including this congregation, to portray the life of love to a petrified world? It takes courage for us to make choices that reflect our hopes, not our fears. But then, as we heard from the first moment of the Christian story: “Fear not!” Amen.