

Casting Out Demons

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Galatians 3:23-29 and Luke 8:26-39

The original title of this sermon was “Right Mind.” I had planned to use the gospel lesson – this very strange encounter between Jesus and a man believed to be possessed by demons – as an entry point to a conversation about mental health and mental illness and understanding and inclusion.

A man met Jesus on the outskirts of the city. He was naked and living among the tombstones, in the graveyard. We do not know his condition. His behavior had caused him to be ostracized, bound in chains, living in the wild. We might understand him now to be schizophrenic or any number of other diagnoses. Jesus speaks with the man and asks him his name. Notice that. He asks him his name. “Legion,” he replies, which is really not a name but a diagnosis, the self-understanding that many demons possess him. It is heart-breaking.

The demons recognize Jesus. They want out of the man, so Jesus notices a herd of pigs, and, with the demons’ permission, Jesus transfers the demons from the man to the herd, and the pigs promptly drown themselves in the lake. That angers the pig farmers, whose livelihood is now dead. They confront Jesus, and when they do they see the man who had been possessed. Now, however, he is healed, as the story says, he is in his “right mind.” The people are afraid and Jesus departs and the man now lives a new and renewed life.

As I said, the original title of this was “Right Mind,” an entry point to a conversation about mental health, how we understand our own and that of others, and how we serve as a welcoming community to all facing mental illness. This story serves as a call, for knowledge, for understanding, for deepened thinking about who we are and who we are called to be, a call for welcome.

The man is called the Garasene demoniac. He suffers, this man who identified as “Legion” who has a real, God-given name. I don’t want to forget him, and his journey, and the way the people treated him and the way Jesus honored him. I don’t want us to lose that thread or that impulse and we will return to it, because it matters a great deal.

Last Sunday, though, as the first service started, what I knew was that there had been a shooting in Orlando and that several people were dead. “Not again,” I thought to myself. Not

again. We mentioned it in prayer and treated it as yet another sad but inevitable incident in the United States in 2016.

By the time the 10:45 service was complete I learned that 49 people had been killed. Any number is tragic, but the depth and scope of this stunned me. I learned as well that this happened at a gay nightclub, and that in some convoluted and bizarre way, terrorist ideology was in the mix.

So Pulse took on a new and urgent dimension in my own thinking, and perhaps yours, and in our life together as a church and a nation. I am weary, I am sad, I am angry, I am bewildered, I am on the brink of hopelessness. I cannot lose hope, but I am right there at the precipice. Perhaps my grief and anger, our collective grief and anger, will lead to somewhere.

I had originally planned to turn the story of the Garasene demoniac on its head by suggesting that not only were those facing mental illness not possessed by demons but rather were those most welcomed by Jesus and therefore most called to be welcomed by us. I believe that.

Yet this morning I want to ask what demons possess us and how can we ask Jesus to drive them out. *What demons possess us and how can we ask Jesus to drive them out?*

There is the demon of **gun violence**. Whether the Orlando guns were owned legally or not seems not to be the question. As much as I understand the the Second Amendment, I cannot believe that we are unable to do anything, find the political will and courage, to enact change. No one needs that kind of assault rifle unless they are in the military or law enforcement. No one. We know the familiar adages – it’s easier to get a gun than a driver license. Why is that? How is that? What would it look like for the demon of gun violence to be driven out and drowned in a lake of common sense and courage and community uprising? That goes not only for mass shootings, but everyday killings that happen in our city’s neighborhood – much less reported but no less tragic. What will it take?

What will it take to cast out the demon of **homophobia** and **transphobia**? We have made such progress it seems – in the church on ordination and in church and culture on marriage. But progress produces backlash. Unconscionable restroom laws in North Carolina. A week ago, a haven for young men, a safe place when many places remain unsafe turned into a massacre site. Perhaps you noticed that pop singer Iggy Azalea was in town. You might not know her music – it’s OK. I listened to some of her music yesterday, and one of our offspring said it would be acceptable *not* to quote it today. She stayed at the hotel across the street and posted a picture of our building, with our huge rainbow banner on the tower, a memorial to those who died at Pulse and a testament to hope. Already she had over 100,000 Instagram likes from the picture – we are usually happy with 20 or 30! There were many positive comments. But there were hateful comments as well, about her, about us, about LGBTQ people. Paul wrote to the Galatians that there is no longer male or female. If that’s true, then what will it take to cast out the demons of homophobia, of discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and

queer citizens, neighbors, humans? Cast it out and let it be drowned in the pages of the history books.

The one year anniversary of the shootings at Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church coincided with the Orlando shootings. What will take to drive out the demon of *racism*? President Obama spoke at the Rev. Clementa Pinckney's funeral and sang "Amazing Grace." Do you remember that? How sweet the sound. Do you remember the debates that followed, about mental health, about access to guns, but also about the Confederate flag? That demon was cast out in many ways, but its echoes linger. Not just in South Carolina, or the South, but everywhere, here. Individual racism and structural racism that insist that separate is acceptable and doesn't care whether it is equal. All are one in Christ Jesus, Paul writes to the church in Galatia. Do we believe that? Can we believe that? Can we believe that gospel so much that the demon of racism is cast out from our hearts, from our institutions, from our culture, and drowned, now, and drowned forever?

And one more demon, at least, and this is a difficult and complex one. The demon of *religious intolerance*, and the need to cast it out along with all other forms of ostracizing and marginalizing and demonizing. I do not know enough about Islam to describe it in one way or another. I barely can do that with Christianity. So I think we need to do several things. We need first to understand the basics, ours and others. We need second to understand the linkages between what people believe and what they practice. If those beliefs and practices lead to violence, then we must name that. But before I can say that about any other religion, I need to look at my own, to see where in history Christianity has been complicit in injustice. The Crusades. The German church's complicity in the establishment of the Third Reich. The Christian, and Presbyterian, theological rationale in the 19th century that supported the practice of slavery. *Times* columnist David Brooks wrote this week that "the core of our confusion is that we are unclear about what a religion is, and how it might relate to violence sometimes carried out in its name." We must differentiate between the spirit of religion, and the motivations of followers, driven by fear, driven by demons. We must differentiate between religion and ideology, what Brooks calls "an absolutist, all-explaining political ideology that is the weed that grows up next to religion." ("Religion's Wicked Neighbor," June 17, 2016) The demon of religious intolerance must be identified and cast out wherever it exists, in us, and others. There is no longer Jew or Greek, Paul wrote, but all are one in Christ Jesus.

There is a thin line between hope and hopelessness, between faith and fear. I pray that I will not dwell in the land of fear for too long. We can feel, can we not, when we name these demons, fear's strong pull? I fear that, we, the collective we, have been so busy demonizing others, that the demons have been demonizing us.

What do we do? Where is there good news to be found? First, we do lament. It is a biblical practice to name what is wrong, not complaining, not whining, but true and deep soul-searching lament. That is what we must do when we identify gun violence and homophobia and racism and religious intolerance as the pernicious demons they are.

But we cannot stop at lament. I was struck by the juxtaposition of three things last weekend: the Pulse shootings, the Tony Awards, and the funeral of Muhammad Ali. There was much use of the word “love” at the Tony’s, and rightly so. But there was also love on Friday, the funeral of an African-American, Muslim, conscientious objector, a fighter by his trade.

Love will look like words, words that challenge the things that need challenging and that uplift the things that need uplifting. Amy Butler writes that “Sometimes in our speaking we have been the voices of division breeding hatred; sometimes we have looked away, silent and void of courage; sometimes we have neglected to use our voices and our platforms to tell the truth with courage and conviction...we have neglected to use...words of love loud or often enough, our silence making space for hateful rhetoric...” (“Speak the power of love before we lose the ability to speak at all.” Baptist Global News) “Let us...preach a gospel of love,” Butler writes. “And let us boldly insist on a complete rejection of any ideology that even suggests anything other than this: every person is a beloved child of God, always welcomed into relationship and community.”

Love wins. We believe that. But that belief cannot be passive. It cannot remain silent. Our very strange gospel account ends today with the pigs drowned and the demons gone and the man in his right mind. Healed and whole, he now wants to travel with Jesus. I would too. But Jesus has other plans. “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” That’s what he did. He proclaimed throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him. *He proclaimed throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.* When we do that, the demons will be cast out, seeds of hope will be sown, and love will win. Amen.