

The Gerasene Demoniac, a Strange Yet Timely Text

Colleagues,

Again a long hiatus. Again an effort to get back on track with sending you material, and to stay there for a while.

The formal relaunch will happen tomorrow night. For now an item that may or may not whet your appetite. It will depend on how you feel about reading sermons.

I'm ambivalent about it myself. A sermon worth hearing is a particular thing, addressed at a specific moment to a specific set of ears. Those blessed by God to find themselves with other ears in other moments may find it worth reading. Then again, they may not. Here the question of worth has to be whether or not the distant reader catches the voice of God speaking to her through these words. If all she spots is another preacher's opining, or worse, his preening, then her time is being wasted. Better that she takes the dog for a walk, or gets online and pays the bills.

So those of us who dare to pass sermons along do well to think twice and swallow hard three times. I've done that with the one I preached last Sunday, and have decided to take the risk. The feedback I've been getting from those who heard it suggests that others might be glad for a glance. The text was Luke's account of the Geresene demoniac, buttressed by the final paragraphs of Galatians. It sent me in directions I hadn't anticipated when I sat down to put the sermon together.

As ever, Kyrie eleison.

I hope this finds you well and still thanking God for much in

these ten or more weeks since you last heard from Thursday Theology.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

"The Sanity Zone"

A Sermon on Luke 8:26-39 ref. Galatians 3:23-29

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (June 19), 2016

Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me'— for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, 'What is your name?' He said, 'Legion'; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see

what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, '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.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

What I read to you just now sounds so strange that at first we can't imagine what it has to do with us at Messiah Church this morning.

But suppose I take the key figure in the story and describe him this way. He's a man riddled with inner demons. He ought to be locked up for the sake of everybody's safety, his own included. At some point the demons get the better of him. They addle his wits. They destroy his judgment. He goes on a rampage.

So does that sound at all like somebody you've been reading or hearing about this past week?

49 people dead and so many others injured in Florida because a man goes crazy with hate and breaks the chains of law, civility, and basic human decency that are there to keep all of us in check.

A year ago the same thing happens with another man in Charleston, South Carolina, and we wind up losing nine members

of our own Christian family.

Up north in Newtown, Connecticut, meanwhile, a lot of parents continue after three and a half years to grieve the slaughter of their little children. It doesn't help that no one seems willing or able to cut through the madness that paralyzes our politics these days and find a useful response to all this violence, a response that both great parties can get behind to the benefit of everybody.

But no, it doesn't happen. It seems somehow more important to fear and loathe and rant at each other, the same things repeated, again and again. That's the sort of thing the man in the story was doing as he rampaged through the graveyards.

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And here's a second thing to notice. The underlying issue in this story we heard is, quote, "those other people," unquote.

Well, of course that's the issue. I say "of course," because it's the main issue that runs through the New Testament from beginning to end. The question is, how do the wrong kind of people wind up being the right kind of people. How does that happen where God is concerned, and what does that mean for our own God-fearing attitude toward the people around us?

We've been listening for the past few Sundays to segments from St. Paul's letter to the Galatians. We'll be hearing more from that same letter for another few weeks. As you listen, be sure to notice how St. Paul is addressing this central issue head on.

Again the question: how can the wrong kind of people wind up all right? Paul's answer in two words: think Christ.

Yes, it's that simple. It's also that profound. "Think Christ." Christ for men, Christ for women, Christ for the ruling class,

Christ for the poverty class, Christ for the little inside crowd that's been hearing the Word of God their whole lives long and trying hard to obey it—never completely, never successfully. Christ just as much for the huge outside crowd, the great mass of unwashed others who have never set a foot inside a synagogue, and don't know Moses from Methuselah, and really, those people eat pork—that's exactly how disgusting they are, you know.

Imagine: Christ for them.

Or in America today, Christ for blacks, Christ for whites, Christ for all those Spanish-speaking strangers who sneak across the border. Christ for crazy liberals. Christ for crazy conservatives. Christ for men who date women. Christ for men who date men, a promise that lots of Christian people are struggling still to get their minds around.

Again the question: how does any human being wind up right with God? Again Paul's answer, or rather, God's own answer through Paul: think Christ.

Or this morning, think of Jesus as we see him in the story, where, like I say, the underlying issue is this main issue, so central to the New Testament, and frankly, to the Word of God as a whole. How, pray tell, do those crazy people who live across the border on the other side of the lake with all their disgusting habits, like raising pigs to eat—how do those people wind up, in the end, on God's good side?

Answer: Jesus gets in a boat and he goes to them. It's that simple. It's also that profound. Later he'll hang on a cross and he'll die for them, but here we're getting ahead of the story.

For now, some things to notice.

First, notice how the naked crazy man with all the demons is a

picture of sorts for “those other people” as a whole.

Within the lifetimes of people sitting here this morning God’s world has been stained again and again with unspeakable outbreaks of mass murder. The most appalling by far was the Holocaust. But then came China, then came Cambodia, then came Bosnia and Rwanda. In every instance the devil’s trick has been to persuade a mass of people that “those other people,” however they’re defined, are devils incarnate who have got to be suppressed. If that means killing them, so be it.

Prejudice and bigotry of any kind is always a matter of demonizing “those other people.” However else the bigot may define them, she also calls them evil, or not quite human. With that she gives herself an excuse to be evil to them.

There’s not a human being alive who doesn’t need to be on guard against that devil’s trick. In America this summer we’d all do well to pay attention to the way we think and talk about our politics. On the one side, it’s so easy to imagine that there’s something fundamentally wrong with anyone who would vote for Mrs. Clinton. Those evil liberals, you know. On the other, it’s just as easy to plaster labels on attendees at a rally for Mr. Trump. For what it’s worth, that’s the temptation I’m fighting with at the moment, and I do have to fight to it, as do you, however you happen to be tempted.

How does any U.S. voter come out right with God? Answer: think Christ. Christ for Mrs. Clinton, Christ for Mr. Trump, Christ for all those crazy people on the other side of the lake, beginning with the craziest guy of them all—and that, of course, is what we see as the story unfolds, how Jesus exercises his astonishing authority and power as the Son of God, and drives the demons away, and makes the madman well again.

More specifically, what he does is to turn this terrible, broken

person into somebody that other people can enjoy and be glad for. Better still, he makes him into somebody that Almighty God can enjoy as well.

So let me push your imagination a wee bit further this morning.

Imagine—or better still, take it for granted—that on this very morning, June 18, 2016, Jesus is busy doing for millions of people the same thing he did for that one person in the story. He's expelling the demons, that is. And the places where he's doing this most visibly, where it's easiest to spot him at work, is in places like this. Churches, in other words. Or more to the point, in churches that deserve the name church, because in those places the Lord of the Church, Christ Jesus is his name, is absolutely front and center.

The older I get, the more I love church, and here's the thing I love most about it. In church, nothing matters about anybody, except this, that Christ is for them.

In church it doesn't matter what you eat or what you wear or where you were born.

In church I don't have to define you—I don't get to define you—by whether you're rich or poor, black or white, straight or gay, young or old. All these things matter immeasurably outside the church. They do not matter here. In real church it doesn't matter that somebody lost it in a meeting the other night and wound up behaving badly. The point is, they're here this morning, and being here, the only thing that matters about them is the one and only thing that matters about anybody.

Again, think Christ. Christ for you, Christ for me, Christ for everybody. I won't ask you in church what party you favor, or what candidate you're voting for—or if it comes out anyway, it won't cross my mind to care. Again, the only thing that counts

for anything in church is Christ for us all.

Church, in other words, is a precious zone of sanity in this mad and crazy world where the demons rage and make us evil in the eyes of the other.

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Or better that I put it this way: that's what church is meant to be—this zone of God-given sanity. Too often it isn't, as St. Paul discovered at Galatia; and what surfaced there, this evil yen to set Christ aside and go back to the bad old days of measuring each other by other standards—that same thing keeps happening again and again. Other gospels get preached, as Paul puts it, and church gets spoiled.

That's why Christ keeps coming here again and again, week after week. Here is his body. Here is his blood. Eat it. Drink it. Look around and notice how others are doing the same. When you do, see them for what and who they are: brothers and sisters in Christ, holy and precious in the sight of God. And respond to them accordingly. After that, go your way, and serve the Lord by taking his sanity with you into the rest of the week.

Let me quickly underscore that.

People often want to know what they should or ought to do with this faith of theirs that they find in church.

So before we're done let me quickly point you to another to notice in today's story. It's the last thing Jesus says to the fellow who's been healed.

The guy, recall, wants to come along with Jesus. He's dismayed, I'll bet, by that strange reaction he's seeing in all his fellow citizens, how none of them are happy for him; how the one thing they want is to get Jesus on his way.

Here's the thing: people get comfortable with the demons they know. They work out ways to cope with them. They'd just as soon that life stayed as they know it, and they didn't have to adjust to a new kind of reality.

Be that as it may: notice how Jesus tells the man to go home; to tell others what God has done for him.

Isn't that what he's saying to all of us this morning? Wherever you go this week, whatever you do, take your sanity with you, and find a way to praise God for it.

We will do that best if we do it the way the man in the story did it. Did you catch that? When he got home he went on and on about what Jesus had done for him.

Now it's our turn.

So suppose, for example, that you're in a conversation this week, and the topic turns to "those other people" and how nutty and awful they all are, how dangerous even. That's an evil spirit talking. I trust you'll catch that. I pray you'll have the nerve to interject and let it be known that you've been blessed with a different view of things.

I hope you'll invite the people you're with to see as you're able to see, to hear what the Holy Spirit has given you to know—that every human being is a person precious to God beyond understanding, a sinful creature that the Son of God gave his life for.

I wonder how different our nation would be these days if every person who went to church on Sunday were to make that witness again and again as the weeks went by.

Come to think of it, isn't that the essential Christian job? To look at others as God does, through the lens of Christ

crucified, and to praise God out loud, in word and deed alike, for what they get to see? Here at Messiah, at least, let's get to work.

May the peace of God that surpasses all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.