

Healing the Great Divides

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
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Galatians 3:23-29

Luke 8:26-39

In this morning's reading from the gospel of Luke we find Jesus and his disciples crossing boundaries. They have just crossed a geographic boundary, sailing across the Sea of Galilee to the eastern shore where they arrive "at the country of the Gerasenes." In doing so, they have also crossed a racial/ethnic boundary from Jewish territory into Gentile territory.

No sooner does Jesus step out of the boat onto dry land than a man possessed by demons approaches him. The story may be a little hard for us to relate to today, since we don't put much stock in the existence of demons anymore. We've relegated demons to the fictional world of horror films and novels. But if you or someone you love has had to struggle with an addiction or with mental illness, you may be able to appreciate how such maladies could be attributed to demons back in the first century. Long before the existence of medicine or psychology, demons offered a way of describing invisible, destructive forces that seemed to have the power to take control of peoples' lives.

Luke tells us that the man had been seized by demons many times. And during these episodes, the man's behavior had been such that his community must have felt pretty threatened, because they felt it necessary to banish him from the city. He was forced to the outskirts of the city, to a graveyard, the tombs. And the community did its best to keep him there. They incarcerated him, binding him with chains and shackles and keeping him under guard. But he would break the bonds and be driven by the demons out into the wild.

Upon meeting the man, Jesus commanded the demons, who called themselves "Legion," to come out of him. The demons begged Jesus not to order them to go back into the abyss, but instead to enter a herd of pigs that were feeding nearby. With Jesus' permission the demons left the man and entered the pigs. And the entire herd promptly rushed into the sea and drowned.

The man was healed. This Gentile, who may have been living with a mental illness, who had been imprisoned, who was unhoused and had no clothes, was finally in his right mind, thanks to Jesus. He was given some clothes to wear. And he sat at Jesus' feet, ready to follow him wherever Jesus might lead. But Jesus told him to return to his home in the city and to tell people how much God had done for him. Jesus not only healed him but also sought to restore the man's place in the community.

This story of Jesus freeing a non-Jewish man from the demons that possessed him tells us that no one is beyond the reach of Jesus' redeeming, healing love. Jesus' saving act went beyond the national bounds of Judaism, anticipating the early church's broader mission to the Gentiles.

Now, you might expect the people in the community to have been happy for the man who was healed and to have thanked Jesus for freeing him from his affliction. But instead, the community was filled with fear. Jesus had disrupted the local order of things. He had upset the status quo. How was it that this man Jesus had the power to command demons, they wondered? What else was he capable of? How were the pig farmers to make a living after suffering such a catastrophic financial loss with the destruction of their herd? And how would the city go about reintegrating the healed man back into their society after treating him for so long as an outcast? This Jesus was too much for them. They asked Jesus to leave, to go back where he came from.

What about us? Do we welcome Jesus' ministry of healing and reconciliation? Or is Jesus too much for us as well? Does he challenge us too much? Does he disrupt our lives too much? Would we rather Jesus went away and left us alone, too?

To be sure, it's challenging to follow Jesus as he crosses boundaries and breaks down walls that divide. He pushes us to go beyond our comfort zones, to heal our divisions, not only along ethnic-religious lines, but along socio-economic and gender lines as well.

This is what the apostle Paul is getting at in his letter to the Galatians when he quotes from a confession used in ancient baptismal services: "in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Jesus Christ."

Now New Testament scholar Brad Braxton says that in order to understand this passage, "we must correct the misconception that Christian unity entails the absence of social distinctions. Paul pleads for the eradication of *dominance*, not the erasure of *difference*. When they enter the Christian community through belief in Christ and baptism, believers do not lose the social distinctions that have characterized their lives."

"Even 'in Christ,' there is social difference," Braxton says, "but Christ abolishes the dominance of one over the other based on these differences. Jews should not dominate Gentiles; free persons should not dominate slaves; men should not dominate women. Christians should foster harmonious relationships characterized by mutuality and respect for social difference."

For Paul, Jesus is the great leveler. Jesus bridges the great divides of race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, and gender. Jesus can heal us of the demons of racism, classism, and sexism. In Jesus

Christ, there is no longer black, brown, or white; there is no longer rich or poor; there is no longer male and female. Within the Church, within the body of Christ, among the baptized, these distinctions are no longer supposed to be causes of division or domination. Paul envisions the Church as an egalitarian community in which all are treated equally. We are all one in Christ. We are all children of God.

Sadly, the Church has been slow to embrace this ideal. We may espouse this thinking in theory, but when it comes to Christian practice, we still have a long way to go. Back in the 1950s and '60s, it used to be said that "eleven o'clock Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America." Fifty years later, not much has changed. For the most part, churches remain divided by race and ethnicity. Multiracial/multicultural congregations are still far too rare. We shouldn't be surprised, given that white Christian churches bear so much of the responsibility for maintaining white supremacy and resisting racial equality.

As for the divide between men and women, some of the largest churches in the world – the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox – as well as Protestant churches such as the Southern Baptists still refuse to ordain women to leadership positions in the church! In our own denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), we are doing pretty well on this front, though for us it is still a relatively recent development. We began ordaining women as Ministers of Word and Sacrament in 1956. Here, again, Christian churches bear a great deal of responsibility for maintaining patriarchy and resisting women's equality.

And socio-economic distinctions? Among Christian groups in the United States, Presbyterians have the second highest household incomes. (Episcopalians have the highest incomes.) But as welcoming as we may be to people who are not as well off, who don't have access to the level of resources that many of us do, it can be very difficult to overcome class differences in education, wealth and income levels.

One of the world's foremost feminist theologians, the Rev. Dr. Letty Russell, who taught at Yale Divinity School, had this to say about Paul's letter to the Galatians:

"We can rejoice that behind the sacrament of baptism is the promise of Christ to make us new so that already we can begin to live beyond the former barriers that denied the full humanity of those who were of the "wrong religion, class, race, or gender." The ancient baptismal formula quoted by Paul . . . reminds us that the divisions of old creation have been overcome, and old forms of domination no longer belong to life in Christ. Just as the original division of male and female in Genesis was overcome, that of Jew and Gentile, slave and free were understood to be overcome in the context of the early house churches. Some would argue that today the list needs to be much longer, to include heterosexual and homosexual, able-bodied and disabled, rich and poor, capitalist and socialist. It is the overcoming of these divisions, and the new life of freedom, that is the sign of Christ's presence."

"In Christ Jesus [we] are all children of God through faith There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of [us] are one in Jesus Christ."

We are invited to live into that truth, to treat one another simply as fellow human beings; to treat one another with dignity, fairness, and equity; to see ourselves as sisters and brothers, members of one human family. We have differences, but Jesus challenges us not to allow our differences to divide us. Rather, Jesus calls us to embrace our differences, to celebrate our diversity. Through Jesus, we see that we have far more in common with other people than we have in conflict. So, let us love one another as Christ has loved us. May it be so. Amen.