

Second Sunday after Pentecost C 19 June 2022

Isaiah 65:1-9 / Psalm 15 / Galatians 3:23-29 / Luke 8:26-39

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

This morning we celebrate a spectrum of people as we recognize Pride Month, Juneteenth, and Father's Day. These outwardly secular celebrations include people who are part of our genetic families, our families of choice, our neighbors, and our communities. And it's a pretty sure bet we each love someone from one or more of these categories, someone who's been a significant presence in our lives.

None of our readings from Scripture today specifically addresses these groups, but they all address God's loving, accepting nature; they call us to unity in turning to God for healing and transformation of our lives.

Our Gospel story this morning captures our attention, if for no other reason than how foreign it may sound to us. What relevance can a reading possibly have that describes a world where demons exist, live in hell, possess people, cause insane behavior, and have conversations with Jesus?

The reading is full of odd details that distance it even more from our modern-day lives - the man Jesus meets once he crosses the lake is possessed by not just one unclean spirit but a

legion of them (that would be about 6,000), that these demons would rather inhabit a herd of swine; and then they run like lemmings to their death. That is some weird stuff.

And the man possessed by demons “did not live in a house but in the tombs.” His life is terribly bleak. He’s completely dominated by what’s taken him over; unable to restrain himself, he’s naked, homeless, and alone. He’s so abandoned, he lives among the dead in a wasteland, a place considered unapproachable, unclean.

The story may not be *completely* unfamiliar to us. There might be folks in the congregation today who’ve experienced homelessness or who’ve been on the brink of that experience. Or someone in our families, someone we love but can’t seem to fix or save, may have experienced it.

Others of us may live “in the tombs” symbolically, in places that are equally painful. Those of us suffering from mental illness or addiction. Those in abusive relationships. Those who feel terribly alone. Those who feel like they’ve done something to disqualify them from acceptance. Those who’ve been rejected because they don’t conform to the norms and identities we’re most comfortable with. Those who struggle but can’t seem to find a sense of value or purpose in their lives.

The more we consider living “in the tombs,” it may be likely we’ve all had this experience at some point.

Saint Luke takes us right to the center of the human condition and it isn’t pretty. In the story of the Gerasene possessed by demons we have nakedness, loud shouting, chains, and homelessness. And this suffering man doesn’t ask Jesus for help; he asks to be left alone, to just not to be tormented. Not to be judged or shamed any more.

Our first reading from the book of Isaiah describes people trying to get past their unfaithfulness to the covenant by offering sacrifices, sitting inside tombs and secret places, yet ignoring God’s hands stretched out to help them.

Pushing God away is a common theme, whether from fear or stubbornness. That’s what demons’ll do to you.

And we all live with demons – with half-truths or lies in our head that cripple our spirits and our imaginations. Quiet, subtle voices that may tell us we’re not good enough, or smart enough, or capable enough. That we’ll never get past our setbacks and losses. When we listen to these voices we may leave our homes – figuratively or physically – and we begin to live among the dead, although we may not realize that’s what we’re doing.

Our readings are filled with references to outsiders – to Canaanite religious practices, a naked madman, the Roman legions, the Gerasene pig-herders.

For the first Christians life was full of such distinctions between “us” and “them.” In our second reading Paul calls on the Galatians to live beyond outward categories, because in Christ we are all children of God through faith. He proclaims, “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 Christ Jesus.” And our psalm today praises those who don’t slander their friends. those who don’t discredit their neighbor.

Unity. We are called to unity in Christ, and we’re still not there yet. After two thousand years it is still a struggle for us.

First-century Christians had to get past the ethnic categories of Jews and Greeks. The distinction between "slave and free" wasn't even faced in the Western world until the nineteenth century, and issues relating to “male and female” continue unresolved into the twenty-first century.

In today’s culture we don’t talk about hauntings by demons. But we all have some scary demons in us, ones that cause us to behave in ways we’d rather not think about. We know more about human psychology today, so we’re more likely to call things that haunt us

“baggage,” that we “need to unpack” or leave behind. But honestly, this stuff functions less like luggage and more like the demons described in Scripture.

We can be pretty good at keeping our demons to ourselves, keeping them under control. Modern life helps us keep them bound up. We can do it through denial, by keeping ourselves very, very busy. Then there’s distraction: by our jobs, our stuff to do at home, our places to go and people to see. And if the odd demon does get out we can just tune out, with TV, alcohol, food, drugs, exercise, shopping. Anything that will take our minds off those demons. We just gotta keep moving.

But every once in a while we may hear a still, small voice, asking who we are and if we’ll listen. That voice has the power to exorcise demons, but first we have to stop and listen. Look at the Gerasenes, who didn’t want Jesus to stay – who actually begged him to leave. In our gospel Jesus decides to cross the lake, without giving any reason, and in doing that, reaches the suffering man. Maybe that’s the point of the trip: to rescue the sufferer and return him to his life. That is what Jesus does - seeks out and finds the lost. That is who Jesus is, the one who brings good news to the poor, who proclaims release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed.

Jesus still does that today, going out of his way, crossing boundaries, meeting us amid our tombs, all to heal and restore us.

We are not alone in the face of our demons, because no demon is a match for the One in whom we have our being. The One who lives in us is a power beyond all demons. If we only stop and listen to the still, small voice. However that voice comes to us, we will know there is nothing in heaven or on earth that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Nothing will keep Jesus from reaching out to us, finding and accepting us, releasing us and loving us. As we are all one in Christ together, we are *all* accepted and included. We are each worthy of God's attention and care. Christ comes and seeks us out to enfold us in love, that we be called not Legion, but Child of God.

To him, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be all glory and honor, now and forever. Amen.