

June 19, 2016
5th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
Luke 8:26-39
The Rev. Carenda Baker

Let us pray: "O, send out your light and your truth; let them guide me, let them lead me to your holy altar, to the inner home of integrity! Then will I know You, Heart of my heart, my exceeding joy; and I will praise you with song, O my Beloved, my Awakener." In the name of God: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen.

It was the 3rd Sunday of June last year that all across the country congregations were grappling with the news of the deaths of 9 black members of Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C. on June 17th. They died in their own church, while they were engaged in Bible study. Church was supposed to be a safe place. They even welcomed into their midst the one who would gun them down a short time later. The deadly violence was inflicted by a young white man who was racist and reportedly hoped to start a race war.

This week has brought to us once again tragic and heart-breaking news of death: Last Sunday saw the massacre of 49 people as the result of gun violence, at a gay dance club called the Pulse in Orlando, Florida. And again, a sick hatred was behind the deadly action. The Pulse, up until last Sunday, was thought to be a safe haven for the LGBTQ community to gather. Most of those killed were folks who identified as lesbian women, and gay, bisexual and transgendered men. Many of them were Hispanic.

As I sat this week with the reality of this tragedy, feeling the sadness and pain, moved to tears at the loss of lives senselessly and horribly cut short, and their families and friends in shock and grieving, I recalled a song that was sung in a faith community of which I was a part some years ago - a community whose primary mission focused on creating a safe, welcoming, healing space for LGBT (sexual minority) folks to gather in Christian worship. The song was titled "Singing for our Lives", by singer/songwriter Holly Near. It began: "We are a gentle angry people, and we are singing, singing for our lives. We are a gentle angry people, and we are singing, singing for our lives." Lyrics of other verses of the song included: "We are young and old together, and we are singing for our lives. We are a land of many colors, and we are singing for our lives. We are gay and straight together, and we are singing for our lives. We are a peaceful loving people, and we are singing for our lives. We are all in this together, and we are singing for our lives."

Singing for our lives. Like the psalmist, singing in lament. Singing in the face of evil, hatred, and discrimination. Singing so as not to be silenced and forced to remain invisible – like non-existent persons. And like the psalmist, singing in hope. Singing in solidarity. Singing truth to power. Oh yes, we still need to be singing for our lives.

Evil, destructive, God-opposing forces are ever present and very strong in our world. These forces sometimes look like they have the upper hand in the fight for humanity's soul. They seek to create enmity, division, and chaos. They feed on fear. But we worship and serve a death-defying God who has defeated evil. Martin Luther described this struggle very clearly in his hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God". "And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us; we will not fear, for God has willed his truth to triumph through us; the prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure, for lo! His doom is sure, one little word shall fell him." That word is LOVE. We belong to and serve a God whose power is present and sure in the form of non-violent love. Love is the only known effective antidote for hate and fear. And this is what we need to be reminded of often. We need to remember who we are, whose we are, and what difference that makes each day in the way we live. That sign of the cross on our foreheads, the one marked with chrism at our baptism is still there. We were sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever. Jesus went through death, and to hell and back, and was raised to close that Divine Love deal once and for all. Love will always win.

Today's gospel reading brings us a snapshot from Luke of Jesus dealing with the presence and force of evil - again. He is crossing over the Sea of Galilee to the land of the Gerasenes, which means that he's not just crossing the sea. He's also crossing boundaries, because the land of the Gerasenes is the land of Gentiles. No self-respecting Jewish rabbi would be taking his band of followers there.

When Jesus gets there, he's confronted immediately by a man who is possessed. Actually, he's more than possessed, he's occupied. Because that's what a legion was – a unit by which the Roman military organized itself. This man isn't possessed by just one unclean spirit, but rather he's occupied by a host of them. A Roman army "legion" designated a group of 6,000 soldiers, so Luke likely wanted to impress upon his readers that this man was possessed by a lot of unclean spirits. There was incredible God-opposing, destructive power present and in control of this man.

When Jesus asks for the man's name, one of the horde within him answers, "Legion, for we are many." How sad this is: the man has no name, no identity left, except for what he is captive to. "Legion". He has become completely defined by what assails and torments him, by what robs him of joy and health, by what hinders him and keeps him

bound, by all those things that keep him from experiencing life in its abundance. His wholesome God-given identity has been stolen.

The man is dangerous to himself and others – the shackles and chains won't hold him, and the unclean spirit drives him into the wilderness when he breaks free of the chains. He is also religiously unclean. He is no longer present among those living in the local town, but rather he dwells among the dead in the tombs. Tombs were places considered ritually unclean. He was already in a state of "living" death, separated from normal people and normal living.

So what Luke tells us is that Jesus, the Jewish itinerant rabbi who proclaims the coming kingdom of God, goes to an unclean land to meet a man possessed by an unclean spirit living in an unclean place. In other words, this is the very last place Jesus should be. Repeatedly in the gospel of Luke, Jesus, the Son of God is a boundary-breaker.

If we stop and think about it, this is where God usually shows up – in the most unlikely places, where you would least expect God to be. At our moments of most profound doubt, grief, loss and defeat, God shows up, just like in Charleston last June and in Orlando this week. God even shows up among those who may have little interest in, let alone relationship with, God.

Luke's Jesus shows us that there is absolutely nowhere God is not willing to go to reach and free, to sustain and heal those who are broken and despairing. Jesus goes in search of this unclean man with an unclean spirit living in an unclean place. This man has been stripped of his identity by an invading force holding him captive. Jesus expels the unclean spirit and restores to the man his God-given identity. Now healed, the man sits down at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And then Jesus sends him back home to tell his family, friends and neighbors what God has done for him. It's not totally surprising that the people are undone by this display of power. Stunned and scared they ask Jesus to please leave.

In today's 21st century realities, Jesus continues searching out those held captive. Those with mental illness and every kind of addiction. Women and men trapped in abusive relationships, afraid of the possible consequence if they try to leave. There is no boundary God won't cross in order to bring freedom to any and all, freedom from anything that diminishes and holds us captive. God seeks and is present with those whose identity is judged inferior because of difference: be it ethnic background, race, sexual orientation, or religious belief or absence of belief.

This story from Luke is good news! There is absolutely no person that is God-forsaken. God loves all of humanity in its diversity: male and female; young and old; gay and straight; white, black, brown, Asian, Latino, Native American; believers and non-believers; Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, atheist.

This good news begs an important question of us as followers of Jesus: Where are we willing to go to be the face of God's healing and liberating love? Whom are we willing to love? To whom will we be present, seeing in their face the very image of God, the face of Christ?

And in the face of such rampant and violent hatred and terror in our world, what are we to do when our hearts are broken by the things that break the heart of God?

We know what to do. Fall on our knees and PRAY. PRAY for others. PRAY for ourselves and our entanglement in the sick systems of which we are a part. PRAY. And then we need to take up the responsibility of living out our baptismal promises, as Bishop Audrey reminded those who were gathered to be confirmed this past Wednesday evening. Resist evil. Repent and return to the Lord when we fall into sin. Take a stand that says "no" to any thought, word, or deed that diminishes life, that does not respect the dignity of every human being. Someone has said about prayer and our call to seed action for change, "Without God, we cannot. And without us, God will not". We are called to work alongside God as partners in bringing God's reign to earth. Part of that work is facing and standing up to forces that oppose the values of God's kingdom coming.

In just a few moments, we will join together in praying a litany for gun violence prevention written by the Rt. Rev. Stephen Lane, Episcopal bishop of Maine. The hope is that in our praying together, the Spirit will move to break open our hearts and lead us toward bold action, and will fan the courage to speak truth to power in whatever our spheres of influence are.

And you are invited to do one thing more today. As you come to receive Communion, touch the water in the baptismal bowl here in front. Make the sign of the cross again on your forehead or over your heart, and remember that you are a child of God. Our identity is found in God. Give thanks for that identity, that love and new life available to all of us each day. Pray for the light and truth of the risen Christ to guide you, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And that song I learned years ago? I'm adding another verse to it. "We are redeemed and holy people, and Christ is still singing, singing for our lives. We are redeemed and holy people, and Christ is singing, singing IN our lives."
AMEN.