

Pentecost 2 C 2019

Welcome to ordinary time! The season of Pentecost. This “green” season – which will last from now until Advent. We’ve lived through the Lent of trying to change our perspective so we might, in fact, change our lives. We’ve spent weeks with the Gospel of John and Jesus’s Last Discourse – his last words – which we heard both during Holy Week and during the Easter season this year. We’ve seen the Resurrected Christ recognizable by his wounds, heard the call not just to take up our cross to follow Jesus but to take up our Resurrection. And we have been promised – and given – the Spirit – God present with us on our journey. And finally, we have been sent – to love as we have been loved.

I have to tell you that as I “recapped” the Scriptural journey we’ve been through over the past months in the lectionary – it seems like we, as a community – have lived through it all again in these past couple of weeks – looking at Wayne’s life, his death, and his continued presence here...looking at how he lived, and how we all are called to live. It’s all of a piece. The Word of God, the Scriptures, are not just words on a page from that big book. The word of God is living – and it speaks to us now, in our own circumstances, our own daily lives, if we let it.

We hear God saying that pretty clearly in the reading from Isaiah.

I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask,
to be found by those who did not seek me.

I said, "Here I am, here I am,"
to a nation that did not call on my name.

I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people,
who walk in a way that is not good,
following their own devices;

That’s God – saying “I so want to be in relationship with you. I’m trying so hard to communicate with you.

But we're caught up in our own way of doing things. Even if we are walking in a way that is not good, we are comfortable with it.

But that's not what God wants for us.

So let us turn to the Gospel to see what *Jesus* reveals to us about the nature of God, the heart of God, what God wants for us. First, it's important to note that we've switched now from John's gospel to Luke. We'll be reading Luke's gospel for the rest of the church year right up to Advent. And just as the beginning of John's gospel gave us a clue about his perception of Jesus – as the Word made Flesh – the early chapters of Luke's gospel tell us important things about how he sees Jesus. It is in Luke's gospel – and only there - that we have the Magnificat, that wonderful Song of Mary, telling of a God who lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry, and sends the rich away empty. And in Luke's gospel, immediately after his temptation in the desert, Jesus returns to Galilee, to Nazareth, and proclaims from the scroll of Isaiah: “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives...to let the oppressed go free.” Luke is intent on showing us Jesus the liberator. The God Jesus reveals to us in Luke is the one who wants us to be free, to be loosed from our bonds.

Our passage from Luke today opens when Jesus and the disciples arrive at “the country of the Gerasenes.” We don't have a lot of information about the people here, except that some of them were obviously raising and marketing pigs – dealing in what was “unclean” for Jews. And we know they had figured out how to deal with those they found different, those they didn't want around them. They had exiled “the demoniac” to live among the tombs – another unclean place. They had deprived him of his humanity, tried to restrain him, and ostracized him.

And so, when Jesus steps out of the boat, and the man possessed comes to meet him, all hell breaks loose.

These people, too, you see, are behaving like those Isaiah describes. They are not being their best selves. They are practicing rituals that are not of God, but still claim that they are holier than anyone else. These people have ostracized the “other” – the demoniac – Legion. They have bound him in chains, made him feel as if he wished he were dead. But instead of preaching the God of payback, Jesus again shows us a different vision of the heart of God, the nature of God.

Here, in the face of all that is wrong, Jesus reveals God restoring to this man his humanity – his nature as a child of God. The people finally have to see him as God saw him: Clothed and in his right mind. And coincidentally, the unclean business with the pigs has been dealt with, too. They’re gone!

Jesus reveals a God who calls us into wholeness and holiness, that is – a God who calls deeper into relationship, and into who we really are – in the heart of God. But that is also a call to change.

The man who was now restored wants to stay with Jesus – which, in this case, would mean *going* with Jesus. And Jesus tells him no – he is to live with and spread the news of the goodness of God — right where he is, among his family and friends. We hear an echo of that in our Psalm: “I will declare your Name to my brethren; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.” But sharing this news, the news of his newfound freedom from that which had possessed him, means sharing that among the very ones who had previously ostracized him. That will be no easy task. He had every reason to see those people as “bad,” every reason to avoid them. After all, they had essentially wished him dead, or at least away from him, in the tombs. Yet God calls us to a perspective that sees even these people with whom we disagree or from whom we *wish* to be separated as persons whom God loves.

23 years ago yesterday, an 18-year-old African American woman named Keshia Thomas was among a large group of people in Ann Arbor protesting a Ku Klux Klan rally that was being held there. The protestors were in a fenced area to keep them separated from the KKK rally, but at some point, a middle-aged white male wearing a T-shirt depicting the Confederate flag and an "SS tattoo" got on the wrong side of the fence – and the protestors knocked him to the ground and started to attack him. There were cries of “kill the Nazi.” And Keshia Thomas ran to him and put herself over him as a shield to protect him. She said to the crowd, “You can’t beat goodness into a person.” And when she was asked why she did that, why she protected someone who most likely held views counter to her own, someone who devalued her and saw her as less than human, she said she had protected the man due to her own religious convictions and because she "knew what it was like to be hurt ... The many times that that happened, I wish someone would have stood up for me." Years later, the son of that man contacted Keshia and thanked her for saving his father. She had seen the person underneath the confederate t-shirt and SS tattoo – she had set him free.

Those we want to ostracize – those with whom we disagree – whether it’s people with a particular political slant or persons in our own families – may be walking in a way that is not good, to quote Isaiah. But we do not have to “repay” them with injury or hatred. We can recognize, as Jesus demonstrated in the gospel, that there is a Legion of power in our lives that can overtake us, that can overtake others. And we can learn not to hold that against one another. Instead, we have the power to free one another, to restore one another.

The other folks in our gospel story – the locals who had their lives pretty much set the way they liked it, ignoring the commandments they didn’t like, - their reaction to the change Jesus wrought – and to the welcoming, inclusive and loving nature of God Jesus revealed – their reaction was not as positive. They were afraid. They were afraid when Jesus liberated this man from the Legion that had possessed him. The change he brought about scared them. And they asked Jesus to leave.

No doubt if you asked them, they would have said they, too, wanted the kingdom of God to come. They, no doubt, wanted change. But they didn’t want *to* change.

And that brings us right back to today. We are in the midst of a time where the values of the Gospel – the values revealed by Jesus as part of the nature of God – seem under assault. There is continued movement not to *welcome* the stranger but to turn him or her away, not to provide for the least among us but to take away soap and toothbrushes and the necessities of life from those at our southern border, all in the name of keeping away those people who are being demonized today. – Perhaps it is not possible for a government to follow the Gospel, to operate out of those values. But it is possible for us as individuals to keep striving to live that Gospel, and to encourage those values in our own families and communities and nation by the words we speak and the way we live our lives.

If we want change, we have to be willing *to* change. It's as simple as that. Amen.