



FROM TERROR TO WHOLENESS

June 19, 2016, The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 8:26-39

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O God of deep compassion and abounding mercy, in whose trust is our perfect peace: draw near to us in our worship of You. As we gather in Your name, guide us by Your Gospel—Your vision for this world. Lead us by the example of Your Son who does not run from terror, but redeems violence with the promise of resurrection. As we hear Your Words for us this day: open our eyes, break our hearts, and turn our focus to the movement of your Spirit. In the name of the one who creates us anew, Jesus Christ, Amen.

A naked man in chains, demons who talk to Jesus, and a herd of pigs that are thrown off a cliff and drowned—that's our strange but redemptive Gospel lesson for today. I'm pretty sure that demon possession and exorcism are not what you expected to hear on a beautiful summer morning. As a bit of humor, Lutheran pastor and author Nadia Bolz-Weber¹ describes this Gospel story as one around which vegetarians and bacon lovers can unite—in the midst of this crazy narrative, they both ask: why did the pigs have to die?

The story that Suzanne just read is actually one of several exorcism stories in the New Testament, but by far, it's the longest and most intense. Jesus enters Gentile territory and is violently confronted by a man possessed by demons. This man is bound in chains, he's naked, he's been hiding in the tombs, and he runs at Jesus yelling for freedom. In this encounter it's actually difficult, both in the Greek and

¹ *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*. Convergent Books, 2015. Page 84.



the English, to figure out who is speaking to Jesus, the demons or the man. This is the saddest part of this man's mental state—we can't even identify his own voice because the demons have seized him for so many years. He's consumed by their power so much so that he was in chains in order to protect himself and others. In the story, the man begs Jesus for release because this terror can't continue.

Within moments of their meeting, Jesus frees the man. Christ commands the demons to release him, and at their release, he kneels before Jesus. Before, he was naked, bound in chains, and yelling terribly. Now, after this miraculous encounter with Christ, the man is made whole, unbound, "at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind."² While demon possession and exorcism may strike us as ridiculous, the redemptive message of the story is the man's miraculous healing and restoration. Having been once terrorized and possessed by evil, because of Jesus this man is now freed and made whole.

Several weeks ago, I had intended to use this Gospel story today to highlight Christ's ability to confront, head-on, the mental state of each one of us, especially those who suffer from crippling mental illness and addiction—because there's a powerful narrative here of Jesus' willingness to meet and overpower these demons. This Gospel lesson reminds us that Jesus is present in the midst of this pain, and he never shies away from welcoming those who are plagued by mental distress. These are great truths that offer much comfort.

So that was the message I had thought I would preach today. But the events of this last weekend in Orlando caused the Holy Spirit to lead me in another direction. As this demon-possessed man reveals, even in the time of Jesus, evil is palpable and real. It's as real as 49 victims killed in Orlando; it's as real as behavior that discriminates against anyone based on sexuality; it's as real as language that vilifies a whole faith community; evil is as real as lives cut short by hatred and violence. Evil is real, whether in Scripture or in our lifetime; there's no denying it. The power of evil is that it binds people, it destroys lives, it wreaks havoc, and evil leaves communities destroyed. The continued violence and hatred that has filled

² Luke 8:35.



our news feeds is evil, just as evil as those demons that possessed the man in our story for today. If we have no other words to say when tragedies happen, at the very least we can name them for what they are: evil.

In the news this week, an article revealed there was a time when Steven Spielberg almost quit directing films. One of the best-known and most successful filmmakers of our time, Spielberg has won countless awards and achieved great success. But his success and vision almost ended after he finished making *Schindler's List*. "The film, which went on to win seven Oscars ...took such an emotional toll on the director that the thought of returning to work filled him with dread."³ In an article this week he said, "I was sad and isolated, and as well-received and successful as that movie was, I think it was the trauma of telling the story."⁴ In the face of such evil, even the great storyteller Steven Spielberg had to take time to process the tangible and dangerous power of evil.

In 2007 Doubleday published *Come Be My Light*, a collection of correspondence between Mother Teresa and her confessors over the span of 66 years.⁵ When this material was released many people were shocked to discover that there was a significant period of drought in Saint Teresa's faith; times when she felt she had no words left to pray to God and could no longer feel God's presence. At one point, she says, "[My] smile is a big cloak which covers a multitude of pains. . . . my cheerfulness is a cloak by which I cover the emptiness and misery."⁶ Much of these letters about her spiritual drought were written during her ministry with the poor

³ Caroline Frost. "Steven Spielberg 'Almost Quit Directing After Schindler's List.'" *Huffington Post*, June 16, 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/steven-spielberg-quit-directing-schindlers-list_uk_5762bab1e4b03f24e3db7b86

⁴ Kim Masters. "Steven Spielberg on DreamWorks' Past, Amblin's Present and His Own Future." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 6-15-2016. <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/steven-spielberg-dreamworks-past-amblins-902544>

⁵ David Van Biema. "Mother Teresa's Crisis of Faith" *Time* magazine, August 23, 2007. <http://time.com/4126238/mother-teresas-crisis-of-faith/>.

⁶ http://www.journeywithjesus.net/BookNotes/Brian_Kolodiejchuk_Mother_Teresa.shtml



and dying in Calcutta; surrounded daily by suffering, she began to wonder if God heard her prayers. Saint Teresa, “one of the great human icons of the past 100 years, whose remarkable deeds seemed inextricably connected to her closeness to God ... was living out a very different spiritual reality privately.”⁷ Saint Teresa, having seen the consequence of evil in this world, found little release from its power.

I share these stories not to depress us or emphasize the power of evil in this world, but in order to face the fact that evil is real. We know this truth if we’ve grieved with the families of victims of gun violence and heard their stories. But their stories are becoming all too common. We’ve become numb to evil’s power because violence is now the norm; it dominates our news coverage every day. And we’re exhausted by these shootings, by this tragic loss of innocent life. We’re tired of moments of silence, of praying for the victims, because nothing seems to change. We’re tired, or we should be, of people vilifying others based on their religion, race, sexuality, or gender. The brokenness of this world is all too real; it’s often more than we can handle. Something has got to give; evil seems to be in control.

Friends, that’s when I turn back to this Gospel lesson for today. It is a text of hope, of transformation, because although evil causes plenty of destruction in this man’s life and in his community, in the end evil is destroyed. In the story, Jesus speaks directly to the demons within this man, casts them out, and we see the man transformed. Evil is always present, but throughout Scripture, God’s power is always greater. Let me say that again: Evil is always present, but throughout Scripture, God’s power is always greater.

Sisters and Brothers, we live in a country filled with violence, confronted with terrible realities that too often destroy lives. But lest we throw our hands up in despair, hear me say that Jesus always has greater power than any evil that exists in this world. In his ministry he calmed the evils of the storm at sea, he offered a

⁷ [David Van Biema](http://time.com/4126238/mother-teresas-crisis-of-faith/). “Mother Teresa’s Crisis of Faith” *Time* magazine, August 23, 2007.
<http://time.com/4126238/mother-teresas-crisis-of-faith/>.



healing touch to those afflicted by the evils of disease, and he even brought back to life those struck by the evil of death.⁸ In his ministry and his resurrection, Jesus conquers the evil that seeks to define and destroy us. Even his own violent death on the cross was not the end of the story. The terrors of the world surrounded him, just like they surround us, but they do not win. Jesus meets evil head on and conquers it—offering healing and wholeness to all who feel terrorized.

One of the things at Brick that we discuss with parents before their child's baptism is the questions they will be asked to answer when they present their child. The one that seems the most strange is, "Do you renounce all evil, and powers in the world which defy God's love and righteousness?" Parents are asked to respond declaratively, "We renounce them." This is the same question we ask our youth at confirmation. In our baptism and confirmation, we Christians are asked to reject evil, its power in this world, and reject any notion that God is the author of terror. Therefore, in the face of such tragedy our response is not to look for someone to blame and not to throw our hands up in despair. Our response is to reject evil, in all its violent forms, and tell others that the God we follow offers redemption.⁹

As you've probably noticed, the story in our Gospel today doesn't end with the man's healing. Jesus frees him from what binds him, mentally and physically, but the man is not allowed to stay with Jesus. Instead of his usual command to "come and follow", here in this narrative, Jesus says "'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.'"¹⁰ Instead of "come and follow", he's offered "go and tell." Where there was once terror, healing and wholeness have taken its place. Evil has been destroyed and now there's work to do—go and tell others about it.

⁸ Today's Gospel lectionary occurs within a 4-part miracle narrative where Jesus confronts the power of the storm at sea, heals the man possessed by demons, heals the bleeding woman, and brings Jairus' daughter back to life.

⁹ The idea of this paragraph was taken from a Methodist pastor's blog (Pastor Kathleen Weber) about the baptism liturgy in the United Methodist Church: http://www.tumseattle.org/content.cfm?id=151&blog_id=6.

¹⁰ Luke 8:39.



So here's what I know, Christ does have the power to change the narrative from terror to wholeness, and in following him our job is to tell others that good news. To quote another pastor, “Jesus exposed the weakness of violence, for he faced it [himself] and it did not change his love. And he calls us to do the same. To love. So take his light and do not let love die... Because evil is strong. But [God’s] love is stronger.”¹¹

Friends, we have work to do.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹¹ Liturgy from Presbyterian pastor Tom Are. Taken from the Facebook post of Village Presbyterian Church: Prayer Service of Lament and Hope in Solidarity with Orlando, 6-17-16.