

## **Clothed in Christ and in Our Right Minds**

*Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, 19 June 2016: I Kings 19:1-15, Psalm 42, Galatians 3:23-29, Luke 8:26-39*

It is hard to know what to say today. As we gathered for worship last week, news of the Orlando massacre was just starting to trickle out. When I arrived at 7 am, it was thought that up to 20 people had died, which was bad enough, but the number rose dramatically over the morning. By the time services ended, we were hearing the extent of the tragedy. A gunman killed 49 people, in what appears to have been a hate crime targeted at gay and lesbian people. It was Latin night, so many of the dead were from the Latino community. The shooter declared his allegiance to ISIS.

This week also marked the one year anniversary of the shootings in Charleston, when a gunman walked into a church, of all places, sat down at a Bible study, and killed 9 people. His writings revealed he was hoping to start a race war.

And during the night, Columbus lost its 12<sup>th</sup> homicide victim of the year. There were 9 homicides in Columbus in 2015, 14 total in the region last year.

Our world sometimes seems to have lost its mind. On Thursday evening, when we gathered with the faith community here to mourn the Orlando tragedy, Jeff Jackson, the priest at St. Nicholas in Hamilton led us in a beautiful act of hope. We sang together "What a Wonderful World." And it is – God created this world in goodness and we need to do everything we can to celebrate and preserve that original gift. It was helpful to be reminded of the world's goodness.

But in spite of its goodness, this world can be as unstable and frightening and violent as the man in today's gospel lesson. The gospel says he was possessed by demons. Maybe it was some kind of illness people in that day could not understand, or maybe it was something else. Either way, something had a destructive hold on him. He no longer knew who he was. Other voices spoke for him. He terrorized the city. He wore no clothes and lived among the tombs in a place of death. People were so frightened of him they tried to keep him chained up, but he often broke free.

Like this poor man, our world is violent. We can't keep it under control. It is possessed by many evil forces, demons of prejudice and hate and fear. They are legion.

So notice what Jesus did when he came to Gerasa, the land of the Gerasenes, and met a man who was possessed by demons.

First, Jesus did not run away. Everyone else in the city tried to avoid this man. Everyone else stayed as far away as possible. But Jesus went to him. Please remember this good news. God incarnate in Christ did not and does not shy away from violence and terror. He addressed it. He leaned in to it. He declared his authority over the unclean spirits by ordering them to leave the man. Jesus did not run away, then or last week.

And we trust Jesus has leaned in to this situation as well. We do not yet see all the ways the Spirit of Jesus is working. We do not know the results. But Jesus is surely present in the outpouring of support for gay and lesbian people. Jesus is surely present in our conversation about guns and public safety. Jesus is surely present with all who mourn and weep. Jesus did not and will not run away.

Second, note that the desire of the evil spirits is what led to their destruction. You want to go into the pigs? Sure, Jesus said, go into the pigs. And the pigs rushed off the cliff and drowned, which got rid of the man's evil spirits once and for all. We see in this story the glorious hope that evil is so destructive it will even destroy itself. It cannot stand. We trust that even this evil of hate and violence and fear will not stand. Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

But the people in Gerasa were not grateful. They did not thank Jesus for healing their friend. They did not rejoice that they had among them one who could rid them of demons. No. They were afraid. They did not want to be set free. So they told Jesus to leave. Strange as it seems, our world may not want to be set free either. It is easier to live with prejudice and violence and fear because that is what we are used to. It is hard to let go of habits that destroy us.

So Jesus left their city. But in a marvelous act of grace he told the healed man to stay there as a witness, one who would tell others how much God had done for him.

And the way the people knew the man had been set free was by this: *They found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.*

What if this story is not just a record of a miraculous event witnessed by the disciples? What if it is a parable of the work of the church in a crazy world?

Jesus came among us to show us the way to God. He opened the way to healing and freedom. He demonstrated his authority over evil. This frightened the powers that be, so like the leaders of Gerasa they got rid of Jesus by crucifying him on a tree. But even death did not stop his saving work. In a marvelous twist, by putting Jesus to death, death itself was destroyed by his life. Life burst forth from the grave and the risen life of Jesus gave life to all the world. And when he ascended, Jesus left his followers here as a witness to his healing presence, to tell everyone how much God has done and can do for us.

And like the healed man the way others know that we have been healed, the way they know we are no longer possessed by the evil around us, is by what we wear.

Paul wrote to the Galatians, *As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*

Paul's image of clothing came from baptism. These verses in Galatians may have been part of the earliest baptismal liturgy. Many New Testament scholars think Paul was quoting the words the apostles said when people were baptized, perhaps even words said over Paul when he was baptized. *As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.* In the early days of the church, people were baptized naked. Men went to one spot in the river. Women went to another. You took off all your clothes. You went down into the water way over your head. When you came out of the water you put on a new, white robe. You were clothed with Christ. And your new clothes represented a change of attitude and heart and identity.

The clothes of baptism are the clothes of a new humanity. *There is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female.* When we are clothed with Christ, distinctions between people fall away, especially in the Body of Christ. We symbolize that belief even today in how we dress at the altar. Everyone wears the same white robe. Even underneath all of this stuff, I wear the same alb everyone else wears. It is a symbol of baptism, our common uniform, to say that we are all one in Christ. Being clothed with Christ changes how we see others.

And, being clothed with Christ changes how we see ourselves. Being clothed in Christ means claiming our identity in Christ as our primary identity, the first thing we put on.

*There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave nor free, male and female.* Then as now, people defined themselves by their heritage. They were as proud and grateful to be Jew or Greek as we are to American or Southern or Episcopalian. They were as conscious of their economic status, as aware of being slave or free as we are conscious of being rich or poor. They were as aware of gender and all that goes with it as we are today. But in baptism, we take off all of those clothes and put on the clothes of Christ. The most important thing about who we are is who we follow.

This is how we are to live in a world that seems to have lost its mind. We are to clothe ourselves with Christ, to let our identity as followers of Jesus be the first thing we put on, the first thing others see, our highest value. We are to wear these clothes in a world that has lost its way and tell others how much God has done for us.

And the clothes of Christ are the gift of a right mind. Hatred, division, evil, violence – none of that is true. That is not who we are or what the world is supposed to be. We are meant for goodness and love and abundant joy.

Oh, Jesus, send our demons into the pigs so that they destroy themselves. And set us free, that we too may be clothed and in our right minds. Amen.

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