

Season After Pentecost [Proper 7C]

June 23, 2013

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown, MD

Readings: Isaiah 65: 1-9, 13-15; Psalm 22: 23-29; Luke 8: 26-39

Grace and peace of God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

There was once a bride who was extremely nervous on her wedding day. She confided to her minister that she was not sure she could make it all the way down the aisle. So the minister, a seasoned veteran of weddings, gave her a bit of advice.

"When you begin your walk," he said, "just remember this three-point formula: First, look straight down the aisle; second, when you get about half-way, look straight up at the altar; and third, when you get near the front of the church, look straight at your groom. First, the aisle, then the altar, then him. I think this will help relieve your nervousness."

The trembling bride agreed to try his advice, and it worked beautifully. She walked with a radiant glow on her face and poise and confidence in her step, with no sign of nervousness. However, there was one small problem. Imagine the surprise of the congregation as they heard her rhythmically repeating three words over and over as she processed into the church, "Aisle-altar-him!" ... "Aisle-altar-him!" ... "Aisle-altar-him!" Which of course they heard as, "I'll alter him".

You don't have to be married to know no person can alter or change another. Influence or help, perhaps, but not change. Transforming lives is God's work. Forgiving sins, healing disappointments, breaking the grip of demons, offering life-giving futures ---- Jesus shows us that this is what our Lord wants to do for us and all of creation.... this is what our Lord *can* do when we are open and willing. So why would anyone tell Jesus to leave?

Jesus is on the "wrong side" of the Sea of Galilee. The western side is the where the Hebrews live. The eastern side is where the gentiles, the foreigners, live. It is where they raise pigs, for goodness sake, that no good Jew would eat. Why does Jesus go there? We are not told. But as soon as he puts his foot on the shore, he's met by a man of the city who was possessed by demons. "Actually he's more than possessed, he's occupied."¹ That's

what a legion was — a unit by which the Roman military organized itself, with 4 to 6,000 soldiers. He wore no clothes and lived among the tomb, among the defiling dead. Despite attempts by his neighbors shackled ---- for his good or theirs (?) ---- to keep him under guard, the demons proved more powerful. *Until* they met Jesus. The demons immediately recognize and fear the power of Jesus. Still they try to negotiate a prisoner exchange — one man for a herd of pigs — so they can still roam the earth for a later reign of terror. But these demonic powers that would rob a person of their identity as a child of God are not as strong as the love and might of our Lord.

When the people of the city and countryside arrive, “they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus,” like a student at the feet of his teacher. He is “clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid.” (Luke 8: 35b) I get why the demons were frightened of Jesus. Facing God’s power of mercy and grace, they were looking at their destruction. Buy why are the people of the town fearful of Jesus? Yeah, yeah — the loss of the swine was costly for its owners. But this wild, lost man who had haunted and horrified the city was healed. He was restored to family & friends, able to contribute and participate in the community in a healthy and meaningful way. Why did that make them afraid? Why not celebrate? Why not bring some more hurting or sick people to Jesus for healing? But no, they were so seized with fear that they ask him to leave.... now! What was so frightening about Jesus?

It began to remind me of a story written by the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegard about an emperor, touring his domain and receiving the accolades of his people. When the entourage reached the market square of one village, his carriage was surrounded by cheering villagers and peasants. To the amazement of his neighbors, one brash young farmer stepped out of the crowd and approached the emperors’s carriage. “Give me a boon, Sire,” he pleaded. “Grant me a special blessing.

The villagers were even more amazed at the emperor’s reply: “Of course, my good

man,” he said. “Get into my carriage. Come with me. Live in my palace. Eat at my table. Marry my daughter. Be my son-in-law.”

The young man exclaimed in delight. To be the emperor’s son-in-law! Then he thought about it. No more Saturday nights at the pub with his friends. No more dirty, comfortable peasant clothes. He’d have to get dressed up. He’d have to take a bath — maybe every week. He’d have to clean his fingernails. He’d have to learn the manners of the court.

He sadly shook his head and lowered his eyes, “No, Sire,” he said, “I would be too uncomfortable. It would put me out of my comfortable customs. It would be too hard to live up to. It takes too much of me.”²

When Jesus is the emperor of our lives and heart, it seems Jesus can frequently come up to dispel demons we’ve allowed to drain the joy out of our lives. When God, the king, claims us as sons and daughters for eternity, we are invited daily to live in God’s presence, to live the abundant life of those who align their lives with God. It sounds good..... even great! Amen to that! Then the “but...” kicks in [no pun intended] and we too might send Jesus away. BUT if I let go of my demons — my failings, my loses, my addictions ---- how will I function? What will I blame? What will be expected of me? BUT if I say yes and follow Jesus, I and my life will be changed..... life may not go the way I planned... it might go in utterly unknown places.... maybe in ways I won’t like? Maybe we can understand the Gerasenes better than I first thought. This healing by Jesus, caused a radical change in this out of control, possessed man. Were his neighbors afraid of what the power of God might do to the “comfortable customs” of their lives and city? Did they see healing and freedom in God’s transforming grace or did they see a loss of freedom?

Recently I read that the last thing many people want in their religious experience is disruption and challenge. What many really want, it said, was a “Jacuzzi Jesus — an experience that will leave them relaxed, warm, and bubbly, at the same time, feeling fit and

trim when they get out. Those who seek a Jacuzzi Jesus want their soul to feel soothed, not stirred, by their encounter with Christ. Another writer put it this way,

“I would like to buy only \$3.00 worth of God, please. Not enough to explode my world or disturb by sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don’t want enough God to make me love a foreigner, or pick fruit with a migrant worker. I want ecstasy, not transformation; I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the eternal in a paper sack. I would like to buy \$3.00 worth of God, please. (With double discount coupons, if possible) ³

Sounds ridiculous — but kind of true. How many times has Jesus offered to free me of demons like poor health habits or chronic busyness? How often do I want the affirmation and comfort of God but not the change or challenge of God’s healing love? Why is it we get afraid of Jesus and send him away?

We might need to spend some time with the man from whom the demons were gone. He WAS the one totally changed by the power of God. He WAS the one who would have to re-imagine life and make his way back into a community that had long written him off as lost. Yet he is not afraid. For the first time in how long, he is in his right mind, in his own skin and utterly grateful to know Jesus and eager to know more about the God he reveals. He is not afraid. Yes, he’d rather go with Jesus than stay, yet he picks up his new evangelism vocation with an urgency and joy, “proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.” (Luke 8: 39b) Letting Jesus in... letting Jesus stay ----- Maybe it’s not as scary as we think. Amen

Linda M Alessandri 6/22/13

ENDNOTES

1. David Lose, “Legion” notes on the gospel text posted on www.workingpreacher.org
2. Carveth Mitchell, “The Emperor’s Son-in-Law” The Sign in the Subway , CSS Publishing Company, 1-55673-056-X
3. Author unknown From Homiletics magazine, April-June 1991, pg. 44

