

Sermon Notes for 6/19/16 (Pentecost 5)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Luke 8:26-39

Theme: DEMONS EVICTED, CHRIST INSTALLED AS LORD

The Point: Christ's power holds sway over the most horrific expressions of satanic might, as He demonstrates how far God's love will go to rescue those who are demon-possessed and demon-bound.

Introduction: About this time a week ago, we had just gotten our first inkling of the horrors that had unfolded during the early Sunday morning hours in the Pulse nightclub in Orlando. Fifty lives were snuffed out in a hail of bullets, 49 people who had come to party and one who had come to kill. More than 50 others were injured and hospitalized due to this assault. Could there be a more convincing incident to illustrate the demonic power of evil in our world?

Added to the tragedy and horror (as if that were not enough), the nightclub was a gay club, and most of those who died were members of the LGBT community. In light of these tragic events, I have heard more than one gay man express his anxiety over this action because the gay nightclubs were one place that gay and lesbian folks used to consider themselves safe and welcome with no strings attached. That feeling has been violated. I wonder whether the church could be that kind of place for LGBT folks. And I am not suggesting that the church needs to accept any sort of behavior as righteous, but that we might examine the ways in which we bear witness to God's love in the face of the most unrighteous of human realities.

In a sense, I suppose, we could draw parallels to the shootings that took place at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The one-year anniversary of that massacre was two days ago, June 17. The nine folks killed in that church were all Methodist African Americans attending a Bible class. Where would you feel safer than in a Bible class at your own church? And yet Satan seeks to sow discord, fear, and terror through this sort of violent and destructive action.

We need the message of today's Gospel lesson, which records an account of **DEMONS EVICTED**, and **CHRIST INSTALLED AS LORD**. The first thing we observe is that the demonic powers prefer to work their horrors through people, often individuals, who are on the margins of society. This Gerasene demoniac ran around naked, lived among the tombs of the local cemetery, and interacted with people in inappropriate ways. He had broken shackles with superhuman strength and could not be held captive. He was totally in bondage to the demons which had invaded his body. And yet this man's antisocial character did not prevent Jesus from interacting with him.

We don't know how this man ended up in the situation we see him in as the story opens. Certainly the demonic powers use many different approaches to take control of the lives of people. We could think of drugs, abusive relationships, human trafficking, alcohol, sexual liaisons and other channels by which Satan works to distort our thinking and pervert our actions. Perhaps the most devastating channel that Satan uses is that of pride, the idea that we know better than God, that we can make better decisions without the Lord's Word and Spirit being involved, that we can control our lives and our destiny just fine on our own. I would suggest that Satan's most effective and pervasive work takes place along this channel, and not with the obvious anti-social perversions evident in the life of this Gerasene.

One of the things that I have heard asked in the week since the Orlando massacre is this question: Did anyone try to reach out with God's love to the shooter? Did anyone seek to use a relationship with him to call him to the side of righteousness and truth? Who do you know who is on the margins, who needs to experience the love of God in a new way to bring him to his senses, to restore his hope, to rebuild her confidence or regain her courage? You continue to be part of the force of Christ at work in this world. As

you interact with those who are afflicted by spiritual forces that have spun their lives out of control, you have the opportunity to shine the light of Jesus into those dark corners.

Demonic powers must give ground to the active power and work of Jesus. The demons that inhabited this Gerasene demoniac tried to engage Jesus in conversation – really, in argument. But as it came to a focus, their basic approach came down to this: “They begged him.” These demons knew that Jesus could really put them into a bad spot if He sent them back to “the abyss.” They would have to return to their commander in chief having failed in their mission, and that would not go well for them. So they begged Jesus to send them into a herd of swine feeding nearby. There must have been quite an army of devils, for they had claimed the name “Legion.” (“Legion” in Jesus’ day referred to a basic unit of the Roman army, made up of 5000 men.) As this legion of devils departed the body of this Gerasene, the entire herd of pigs rushed down the bank to the lake and drowned in the lake. Demons are not satisfied until they have fulfilled some mission of destruction. Satan cannot be creative in the ultimate sense. All he can do is twist and distort and misrepresent God’s good creation in ways that turn it demonic.

Examples of this are legion as well. Family is God’s good creation, meant to mirror the fellowship that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have shared through all eternity. But Satan works to distort and manipulate our families into organs of his plan of confusion and injury to members of the family. So for many people, a broken, wrecked family has become their reason for abandoning any relationship with God.

Success can be a tremendous rush. And God, who pronounced the verdict “very good” over His whole creation, can also be glorified in our successes. But Satan can turn those successes into reasons for pride and self-glorification, so that God’s glory is the last thing we think about. Success can open the door for demonic control of our lives.

Education and learning are good things. God has made us as creatures who learn and grow and in that learning and growing we reflect something important about a God who loves us with an ever-increasing love. But Satan invents ways that learning can be perverted into merely a tool for our own personal enrichment and into a way of controlling others who are “beneath” us.

But the mission of this “legion” was redirected by Jesus. He holds the power over all demonic powers. The demons, including Satan himself, are all creatures after all. Some people imagine the spiritual world to consist of a “good god” and a “bad god,” who are constantly battling with each other, and the outcome is always a question mark. The biblical picture is far different. Demons are creatures, rebellious creatures, it is true, but always creatures, subject to the final will and design of the Creator. We used to have a saying that our kids picked up on quickly when they were little and their time of enjoying the bath was at an end. “When Mama says, ‘Get out,’ GET OUT!” At a much higher level, when Jesus says, “Get out”, the demons have to get out. And that they did, leaving a path of destruction in their wake, but leaving one man free in his body and once again in his right mind. Jesus does powerful work in opposing Satan’s devices.

Proclamation of Jesus’ power and His kingdom continues His work of setting people free. Today is the celebration of Juneteenth Day. It doesn’t have much traction up north, but down south it is still remembered widely. The day commemorates the day when Union troops landed on the beach at Galveston, Texas, in order to announce and enact the Emancipation Proclamation, written and signed by President Lincoln over two years earlier. Finally the slaves came to realize their freedom and to act upon it. The following story reflects a similar occasion.

“Theologians tell a story to illustrate how Christ's triumph presently benefits our lives: Imagine a city under siege. The enemy that surrounds the city will not let anyone or anything leave. Supplies are running low, and the citizens are fearful. But in the dark of the night, a spy sneaks through the enemy lines. He has

rushed to the city to tell the people that in another place the main enemy force has been defeated; the leaders have already surrendered. The people do not need to be afraid. It is only a matter of time until the besieging troops receive the news and lay down their weapons. Similarly, we may seem now to be surrounded by the forces of evil – disease, injustice, oppression, death. But the enemy has actually been defeated at Calvary. Things are not the way they seem to be. It is only a matter of time until it becomes clear to all that the battle is really over.” (Richard J. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency*, pp. 149-150) We are the citizens of that city, and Jesus has “snuck through” enemy lines to announce the kingdom’s arrival. It is only a matter of time before the victory is finally in place for everyone.

General Dwight Eisenhower once said, “There are no victories at discount prices.” Interestingly, this strong, motivated military leader, once he became president, worked hard to keep the United States out of military involvement during his two terms. But his point about the cost of victory is significant. The victory of our Lord Jesus over the forces of sin, death and destruction was not won cheaply. It required His suffering and dying on the cross. The blood of the innocent Son of the living God was poured out on the dust of this rebellious planet.

The Gerasene demoniac became a proclaimer of the kingdom. After he had been healed and had spent some time with the Savior, the man wanted to go with Jesus. This is just the opposite of many of the people of the region, who “asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear.” I wonder what they were afraid of, don’t you? Were they afraid that Jesus would unmask the demons residing in their own hearts? Were they afraid of the economic impact of kingdom intervention? After all, Jesus’ actions with the demons had resulted in a huge herd of pigs being drowned and lost to the swineherds.

But the man wanted to go with Jesus. He had a sense that Jesus embodied the very kingdom of God, and he wanted to be part of that kingdom. However, Jesus had a better plan. He knew that this man had become a true beachhead of the kingdom in his own land. So he told the man, “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.’ So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.” Here is a fascinating little detail. Jesus told him to declare how much GOD had done for him, and here his witness was all about what JESUS had done for him. He had no problem identifying Jesus with God Himself. This powerful proclamation, supported by the exorcism and new life that this man had experienced, no doubt had a powerful influence on many of the people among this man’s family, friends, and community. If you see this sort of transformation taking place in someone’s life, wouldn’t you pay attention? As people see our lives transformed under the Gospel, they will pay attention.

God’s victory and His transforming power may come in ways that we could never predict or control. Colin Chapman, in *The Case for Christianity*, quotes Ugandan bishop Festo Kivengere’s account of the 1973 execution by firing squad of three men from his diocese. He tells the story this way: “February 10 began as a sad day for us in Kabale. People were commanded to come to the stadium and witness the execution. Death permeated the atmosphere. A silent crowd of about three thousand was there to watch. They brought the men in a truck and unloaded them. They were handcuffed and their feet were chained. The firing squad stood at attention. I was wondering what to say. How do you give the gospel to doomed men who are probably seething with rage? We approached them from behind, and as they turned to look at us, what a sight! Their faces were all alight with an unmistakable glow and radiance. Before we could say anything, one of them burst out: ‘Bishop, thank you for coming! I wanted to tell you. The day I was arrested, in my prison cell, I asked the Lord Jesus to come into my heart. He came in and forgave me all my sins! Heaven is now open, and there is nothing between me and my God! Please tell my wife and children that I am going to be with Jesus.’ The other two men told similar stories, excitedly raising their hands, which rattled their handcuffs. I felt that what I needed to do was to talk to the soldiers, not to the condemned. So I translated what the men had said into a language the soldiers understood. The military men were standing there with guns cocked and bewilderment on their faces. They were so dumbfounded

that they forgot to put the hoods over the men's faces! The three faced the firing squad standing close together. They looked toward the people and began to wave, handcuffs and all. The people waved back. Then shots were fired, and the three were with Jesus." Even the violence that these men faced could not persuade them to lose their joy or their focus on worshiping their new Savior.

Conclusion: Christ's power holds sway over the most horrific expressions of satanic might, as He demonstrates how far God's love will go to rescue those who are demon-possessed and demon-bound. He showed it graphically in the life of this Gerasene. But He continues to show His power over Satan's deception as the Word is proclaimed in lips and in lives. I mentioned earlier the massacre in the Charleston church. Two days after the shootings, at a formal hearing for the murderer, one after another of the families of the victims proclaimed the power of God's love directly to Dylan Roof, the killer. Nadine Collier, daughter of 70-year-old Ethel Lance, said at the hearing, her voice breaking with emotion. "You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never, ever hold her again. But I forgive you." God's power to forgive holds sway over the hatred and vengeance and violence that Satan espouses. And each time we bear witness to Christ in such situations, we are part of the train of witnesses that stretches all the way back to the tombs and the homes of Gerasa, and to the man whom Jesus set free there, free to witness, free to live again, free to know and to love and to serve Jesus with all his heart. May that same freedom mark our lives this day and every day, to Jesus' honor and praise. AMEN!