

ORLANDO, THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT, AND THE POLITICS OF FEAR; LK 8:26-39; 6/19/16; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBY. CHURCH

I hope we are still reeling. I hope we haven't gone back to our ordinary day-to-day routine, just yet. The shooting in Orlando only one week ago was a seismic event in the life of our nation; just as all the mass killings before it were: an office in San Bernardino, CA; an elementary school in Newtown, CT; a church in Charleston, SC.

Fifteen such major mass killings in the past seven years – too many to list in the space of a sermon. The danger is our becoming numb to the carnage. And so we will read the names of the victims during our prayers today. To hear the names is to let the reality of the loss of life sink-in, below the headlines. It is to put faces on the numbers and to set aside, just for a moment, the furious policy debates and shameful campaign posturing that surround such violence. First and foremost out of basic human decency and respect we pay tribute to those who were lost and to their loved ones who grieve.

This past Thursday the President met with each victim's family; those present said he choked up as he listened to them talk about the joy their loved ones brought into their lives; he hugged every person present; there was no sign he wanted to be anywhere else. He is by now the 'consoler in chief' after mass killings; he comforts the grief stricken on our behalf as President but also as a husband and father. We remember today these young adults cut down as they sang and danced, for not to do so would be to allow the violence to define us.

The President's sobering comment that this is a moment to decide what kind of nation we want to be, and that to actively do nothing is to decide, is not just rhetoric.

We live in a democracy. We are approaching a critical national election this November; the President's statement went beyond a dysfunctional Congress and its unwillingness to even hold debate on his judicial appointments, his appointments to the Departments of State and Treasury who actively fight terrorism; and, of course, proposed gun legislation of any kind.

The President's call is directed to all of us who have the privilege and responsibility of voting. Sometimes we forget our form of government is an organic, 'living thing.' It began as an improbable experiment. No one knew if 'the people' could govern themselves. Our track record over 240 years is not perfect. But we have been consistently open, inclusive, and committed to preserving the rights allowed for in the Constitution. Those rights are now challenged by the call to close our borders to the members of an entire religion and by attacks on LGBTQ people. The question of governing ourselves is still an open question.

Shift with me to the lesson from Luke today.

It is the longest narrative of a healing story in the New Testament.

Jesus' ministry has taken him to the outer reaches of Galilee – he is in Gentile territory among swine keepers and a region where demons are numerous and destructive.

The town and the man Jesus encounters have a “settled” arrangement. The man demonstrates what today would be identified as a form of mental illness; consequently, he has been separated from family and friends.

The leaders of the town have removed him to a place called ‘the tombs.’ Out of sight, out of mind. They chain him. Occasionally, he breaks free of the chains then wanders naked and aimless.

This is a community that has learned to live with demonic forces, by isolating and partially controlling them. Fred Craddock, the great teacher of the Bible writes, “the successful balance of tolerance and management of the demonic among this village also allowed the people to keep any attention off their own lives.” You know how this goes. Whether in a family, classroom, or group of any size or kind – the ones who have been identified and treated as the ‘bad actors’ take the attention away from everyone else including those engaging in below the radar violations of acceptable norms and behavior. We worry about the bad person and ignore our own aberrant conduct.

When Jesus calls the demons out of the man he becomes rational and sane; the villagers react in fear and anger. You’d think they’d thank Jesus for healing this poor soul – one of their own. But they shun Jesus and tell him to leave their community.

You see, Jesus has disrupted their settled arrangement with the dark forces; he has transformed a person who was rejected, marginalized, and labeled. The labels that permitted their exclusion of the man from their society have been overcome. The old definition of who the man was, that literally and socially imprisoned him, is made null and void by the power of Jesus.

The old system of defining and dealing with the demons is now impotent and defunct. The deal the village has with the devil has been exposed as unworthy of God’s purpose for human life. We don’t know if anyone extended friendship to the man who was healed; and though he begs to remain with Jesus, Jesus tells him to return to his home and go into the countryside and proclaim the power of God. But the villagers ask Jesus to leave; there is no telling what broken, oppressive system, family or marriage he might turn to next to expose and expel the forces of darkness. Rather than face themselves and their brokenness, they want him gone.

How does the story relate to us today? To Orlando? It is interesting to consider that while the labels and many of the exclusionary laws and practices with regard to LGBTQ people have been overturned in many states, much of the prejudice and bigotry against LGBTQ people remains intact.

The shooting in Orlando is a sobering reminder that LGBTQ people, their allies and friends are not as safe in our society as we may have presumed.

The old, settled arrangements around marriage and family life, around sexuality and sexual orientation and gender identity no longer apply. A new, inclusive, pluralistic understanding of human sexuality is making its claim in our society and courts, and in our customs and mores.

The sermon title refers to the Politics of Fear. Once a person or a community are made vulnerable to their worst fears – fears not squarely faced but inflated and made more ominous and omnipotent than they are –

then if you are a politician or leader of any kind you can dictate to the people a path of safety and escape. If they are frightened enough and the politician malevolent, narcissistic and calculating enough, the people will choose routes of escape that violate their own values and principles.

They will be blind to the self-serving motives and agenda of the politician; they will not perceive double standards, bigotry or ‘conflicts of interest’ or others who cynically buy elected officials; they will chant tired slogans bloated with nostalgia and fear; and trust ideologies impervious to common sense, open debate, logic, or the common good.

If this campaign season has revealed anything it has exposed a surprising level of fear in the United States. But it has also tapped into a startling depth of pain and anxiety caused by a stagnant economy.

We have heard how our economy has permitted the wealthiest citizens to escalate, beyond imagination, their wealth (and power) while many of those who used to be able to sustain a reasonable quality of life and standard of living have in recent years been unable to do so. Here’s an interesting statistic – the average income among the top twenty-five hedge fund managers last year was \$500 million and the top two made more than \$1.7 billion each.

When such numbers are reported and we are told that the siphoning off of our nation’s productivity and wealth among about 1% of the population will have dire long-term economic consequences causing more suffering and pain causing more people to buy into the politics of fear. The other compelling reason the people of the Gerasene village wanted Jesus gone was because healing the man cost the village a lot of pigs. His exorcism caused an entire herd of swine to rush into the sea. The gospel does stir the economy. Healings, conversions and the embrace of Christian ethics radically influence our getting and spending. The Gerasene people are not praising God that a man was healed, they are counting the cost and finding it too much.

We are at a watershed of American history. On the one hand, our social attitudes and values have reached a critical mass and turning point that have allowed for progressive legislation that even five years ago would have been unimaginable.

On the other hand, there is a growing segment of the population that feels left out because they cannot afford daily living expenses while a few enjoy historic levels of affluence, influence and wealth.

These social and economic forces are played out not surprisingly in Presidential elections. The first black President and the first female presidential candidate symbolize the power of a diverse and progressive nation. Yet another candidate bullies, demonizes women and people of color, and rejects human rights enshrined in our Constitution to wild and wide acclaim.

If ever there was a good time to live in a democracy it is now. We will – either by actively doing nothing – or by our careful and prayerful exercise of our rights and freedoms shape the direction and destiny of our nation at this ominous fork in the road of our history.

But to simply rally the votes to turn the country in a humane and life-affirming direction will not be enough.

We need to exorcise some demons – or invoke the power of God to do so. The bigotry, bias and violence that is fueled by economic fear and suffering will not go away by itself.

What can a church do? Listen and learn. Educate and engage – right here in Buffalo, New York. We don't have to worry about Chicago or New York City; we have enough to keep us busy right here, in our own Gerasene village.

We have settled arrangements here in the Queen City that give the illusion we are doing the best we can and poverty and suffering are at least partially under control;

But there are people condemned to live in the tombs of our poorest, blighted communities; people we've segregated and manacled with the shackles of economic disparity because of their skin color; others whose sexual orientation is like an iron fetter that prevents them from access to jobs, housing and common fellowship. I know this most recently because of a black pastor from the East Side who described the challenges of a dysfunctional school system, inadequate public transportation, unemployment and debilitating health problems with limited resources as "his world" of ministry.

Listen and learn. Educate and engage. Then let the Spirit move. If we can do that we just might invoke the power of God to call out the demons of prejudice that allow us – right here in this congregation and pulpit – to point to the poor, oppressed, uneducated, condemned members of our community where violence, drug abuse and unemployment fester – and say ain't it awful, then go about our busy lives Monday morning.

With some of the more subtle and under the radar demons of racism and prejudice gone that white liberal congregations and pastors tend to hold on to, we might find the healing power of God's love at work in *our very midst*.

We just might find the American experiment, in this very community, fulfilling those words at the base of the Statue of Liberty – give me your tired, hungry and poor, not to segregate with the crumbs of economic recovery but to welcome into the midst of our opportunity and affluence.

The President is right – we have to decide what kind of nation we want to be. Amen.