

20 June; Proper 7C2010
I Kings 19:1-15a; Ps 42:1-7
Gal 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

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Big butter Jesus was struck by lightning this week. For those of you who are not familiar with him, he was a sixty-two-foot-tall statue of our Lord's torso, made of yellow Styrofoam, wading in a lake in Ohio. Now, he is only a charred metal frame, bare robotic hands reaching toward the heavens. A disquieting spiritual symbol, perhaps, but a victory for people of taste everywhere!

Certainly, this has been a time of signs and wonders. From the oil spill with its slicked beaches and oil-blackened sea-life, to the flash-floods and the flotillas trying to get into Palestine, to the talking heads interpreting the elections and the economy and the ever-present background of the longest war in the history of the United States, there is enough and more to keep us always distracted, always talking, always frustrated or excited about something. It's enough to make you wonder: Why did Elijah have to go into the wilderness? We have wind and earthquakes and fire right where we are!

And yet, the wind and fire and earthquakes were *not* the voice of God. Elijah had to get past all those -- simply wait them out -- until they died away and he was able to hear, beneath the tumult, "a sound of sheer silence. When he heard it," Elijah came out of the cave, with his face covered, to stand the presence of God. (I Kings 19:12)

It is a challenge that resonates all too clearly for us in this postmodern world. It is the story of our lives of faith. Previous generations, we like to believe, walked out their doors into the quiet of the countryside and plowed their fields, listening to the calling of the birds and thinking. We step onto city streets, go to workplaces where machines whir and hum, where e-mail bleeps and phones ring, and try to keep our attention on our tasks for a few minutes at a time, amid a whirl of constant interruption. And that's if we are lucky enough to have a job! For those who do not, or whose retirement savings are scant, time is too often a burden, a slow gnawing of anxiety about food, about rent, about the future, which blots out all other concerns. And yet, perhaps that is too simplistic a view of the past. In every age, men and women of faith have struggled to still their souls from the press of everyday cares enough to hear the still, small voice which leads them home.

The mystics of the Christian tradition have found in this passage a perfect description of the experience of prayer. We step back from the concerns of our lives, withdraw to try to attend to our own souls, and our souls rise up to meet us, crammed full and to bursting with the concerns of the day. We take each one and offer it up to God, trying to get to a place of peace, but like a legion of demons, our preoccupations just keep coming, and coming, and coming, until we are forced to know the concerns of our heart. Only then, in owning them and gently offering them for blessing, are we able to reach the still point where God dwells in our soul. Only then are we able to be nourished by the word of grace, which speaks against all that demands our attention: "Do not fear. You are perfectly loved. Be strong, and of great courage. You have been redeemed by Christ, and death has no power over you. If God is for us, who can be against us?"

A few years ago, astronomers managed to isolate some ghostly noises in space: sounds of chiming and tapping and pulsing. They turned out to be the music of the spheres -- every star in heaven around us singing forth its name, just beyond our hearing, a symphony pitched for other ears than ours, which has been going on all our lives, and will as long as sun and moon endure.¹ A sound of sheer silence.

¹ If you wish to hear brief clips of some star-sounds, you can find them at http://www.world-science.net/othernews/060809_spheres.htm.

So it is with our lives. The renewing current of grace runs deep under the surface, guiding, sustaining, and making us whole. This is the bread of angels, on which we can journey for forty days and forty nights, and we have it already in our own possession. We do not need to be exhausted. We do not need to be discouraged or fearful. We can taste of it, and live.

But here's the catch: it runs under the surface of *our* life, our life as it is, and not in another place. Evelyn Underhill writes, "Most of our conflicts and difficulties come from trying to deal with the spiritual and practical aspects of our life separately instead of realizing them as parts of one whole. If our practical life is centered on our own interests, cluttered up by possessions, distracted by ambitions, passions, wants and worries, beset by a sense of our own rights and importance, or anxieties for our own future, or longings for our own success, we need not expect that our spiritual life will be a contrast to all this. The soul's house is not built on such a convenient plan; there are few soundproof partitions in it. Only when the conviction -- not merely the idea -- that the demand of the Spirit, however inconvenient, rules the whole of it, will those objectionable noises die down which have a way of penetrating into the nicely furnished little oratory and drowning all the quieter voices by their din."

Elijah had to flee into the wilderness because Jezebel was trying to kill him. We do not. (She's dead -- been dead a long time.) Our task is to live the substance of our faith right here, where God has planted us. It is to breathe the love of Christ into the people and things around us, the same imperfect people and stubborn realities which strain our ability to love at all.

This is where the Gerasenes went wrong. They were not bad people. They were simply confronted by a reality they could not understand, and they met it with fear, not with love. Confronted by the demoniac who hid among the tombs, the naked man of preternatural strength, they tried to restrain him with chains, but not to take him into their lives. And so, when Jesus came along and healed him, when Jesus named his demons and cast them out, one by one, they "were seized with great fear." (Luke 8:37)

But what was frightening about a man restored to health? Perhaps, the story implies, they were upset about the loss of their pigs. After all, someone owned those pigs, and if the cost of restoring another person to health was a cost they would have to pay, then they preferred their own interests to his. We live this today in all our struggles around education funding, pensions, and healthcare: nobody will say that it is a bad thing to educate children, to enable the elderly to live lives of dignity, or to heal the sick, but few of us want to pay the costs of tending one another. And it runs true in our own lives as well. How many of our family quarrels take place late in the day, when we are tired and we have worn through our stock of easy forgiveness, and yet those around us demand our attention, our time, our love? We care for them; we want them in our lives; and yet, we balk at the cost of their presence. "Bear one another's burdens," writes St. Paul, "and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." (Gal 6:2) Bear with one another, for the love of those around you is your glory and your cross. But Paul would not have had to write it if it were an easy thing to do.

And yet, there is, perhaps, another problem for the Gerasenes, for beyond the ways that Jesus challenged their self-interest, he challenged their self-image as well. When they wrapped chains around the demoniac, when they allowed him to leave the village, they allowed him to become something other than what they, themselves, were. He was a naked man, a man revealed as they were not revealed -- and yet, a man revealed is still a man. When Christ stepped out of the boat and spoke to him, asked him his name, he was claiming him as a brother, as a member of the human race. And when the man replied, "my name is legion" (referring to the demons that were in him), Jesus did not allow him to define himself as inhuman, but remained with him until the man could see himself as a human being, could re-enter normal life.

To people whose idea of holiness is an inhuman perfection, there could be no greater affront than a savior who challenges them to see what they really were. They were not separate from that

man. He lived inside each one of them, as he lives inside each one of us: the naked human being who bears the preternatural strength of our past hurts, past grief, and past failures, the self we try to confine and trammel rather than to heal, because that is what we believe we are supposed to do. And yet, Christ met him! Christ owned him! Christ healed him! Christ showed us what we are to do with our own selves, because, until we learn to love the one who cries within us, we will be unable to tend and heal those who cry around us. No wonder the Gerasenes had left the man among the tombs! There is nothing quite so bitter to us as one who shares our own failings.

Yesterday, Bishop Councill quoted in sermon Anne Lamott's Five Rules for Being an Adult:

1. Have nothing wrong with you.
2. If you do have something wrong with you, don't admit it to yourself.
3. If you cannot deny what is wrong with you, hide it from others.
4. If you cannot hide it, at least have the decency to not show up.
5. If you insist on showing up, be ashamed.

What Jesus did with the demoniac, what he does in each one us, is to turn that world and those rules on their head. To be made whole, we need to admit to ourselves that we are broken. We need to own it, even in front of others, for that is the only way we can be of help to one another. We need to come into one another's community and into God's even when we are reeling, even when we can no longer hide our struggle. And we should never be ashamed, for none of that, none of it, can separate us from God's perfect love given to us in Jesus Christ our Savior.²

Each day, a circle of people in recovery gathers in our auditorium, to share their stories, to support one another, to own their addictions; they know that only in owning them can they ever be freed from being owned by them. We rarely see those people. They come at times when others are not in this building. But in a strange way, they are the heart of our ministry, for each one of us is a person in recovery, working all our life long to be made whole. We do not need to build for ourselves Styrofoam Jesuses, false images of a plastic perfection, but to hold onto the living and breathing One who disquiets our soul, calling us in that small voice which will not let us rest until we rest in him. Out of his mercy, we learn to live mercy -- here, now, in this life, with these people, these thorny, blessed, stubborn, glorious people God has charged us to love.

Evelyn Underhill writes, "When we look out towards this love that moves the stars and stirs in the child's heart and claims our total allegiance, and remember that this alone is Reality and we are only real so far as we conform to its demands, we see our human situation from a fresh angle; and we perceive that it is both more humble and dependent, and more splendid, than we had dreamed. We are surrounded and penetrated by great spiritual forces of which we hardly know anything. Yet the outward events of our life cannot be understood, except in their relation to that unseen and intensely living world, the Infinite Charity which penetrates and supports us, the God whom we resist and yet for whom we thirst; who is ever at work, transforming the self-centered desire of the natural creature into the wide spreading, outpouring love of the citizen of Heaven." Amen, and amen.

² Cited in sermon preached at diocesan ordination of priests, June 19, 2010.