

Sermons at Saint Mark's

The Reverend Mary Shehane

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, June 20, 2010

Isaiah 65:1-9; Galatians 3:23-39; Luke 8:26-39

The price of healing is never too high

Healing is not always welcome, at least not in our Gospel today. A man with many demons meets Jesus. He lived among the dead in the tombs, without clothing, often chained and shackled. Despite being chained and guarded he would break those bonds and be driven into the wild by the demons who possess him. We are told this strange story of the Legion of demons asking to be driven into the herd of pigs rather than going back to the abyss. Not a good choice on the part of Legion as the pigs hurl themselves into a lake and drown. So off to the abyss it is! Demons make for great cinema but are a tough theological sell in these modern times. And you can read a lot of commentaries doing their very best to stuff this scripture into an acceptable modern box. Even to the point of saying that the reason the swine run into the lake and drown was that Jesus frightened them by yelling at the possessed man and the possessed (or mentally ill man) yelling at Jesus. I find a couple of flaws in this explanation. One, pigs can swim, two the pigs were familiar with the area and would have simply moved away. Pigs being smarter than we would like to think they are. And does it really matter if the possessed man was mentally ill or possessed? He was in desperate need of healing.

This is a strange story on the face of it. And it would be easy to be distracted by its strangeness. For me this Gospel is about healing and its cost. Not only to the person who is healed but also for the whole community.

The equilibrium of the community was just fine, thank you very much. There was the man with the demons in the tombs, the pigs were in the field and the town's people were going about

their business. And all was right with the world. The people of the community could place the locus of evil on the poor soul living in the tombs. The healing power of God comes pouring into the community and destroys their comfortable equilibrium.

In short Jesus arrives and all heaven breaks loose. The man is healed – where does he fit now? Where does evil reside now? The pigs are dead – I have always felt a little sorry for the pigs – that somehow they were some sort of holy collateral damage. And the town's people are terrified. They do not rejoice with the healed man they tell Jesus to leave.

For the man who receives healing, there is also a price. He must stay in his community and declare how much God has done for him. And he accepts the price of healing and “So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.”

Think about that for a moment. You are going about your daily routine and the man who you know as demon possessed comes to your door proclaiming all that God has done for him. I will own up that I would be very suspicious and probably afraid.

It would take time for this community to believe that the man was healed. It would take time to accept him back into the community. I remember talking to someone to me about how this scripture spoke to him. He was a recovering addict. He said that when he got sober he felt like this demon possessed man in our Gospel. There he was in his right mind sitting at the feet of Jesus wondering how to live his life. It took

awhile, a very long while for his family to believe he was sober.

I am going to share a personal story with you. I have shared this once before so I beg your indulgence. Some years ago my father died of a brain tumor. And this is the public service portion of the of this sermon. He was a heavy smoker. From the date of his diagnosis until his death was thirty-one days. My father was a very angry, difficult, complex person. He was very angry with God and refused to go to church or let my mother go church. Within two weeks my father lost the power of speech. But before he did, and I mean just a few days before he did, he called my sister to his bed and said “You know when you get through with your trip around the world, it feels good to go home.” My father was also very much of a racist and never once questioned his beliefs. One day my mother and I went to see him. The nurses had him out front of the nurses station to keep an eye on him. He was seated next to an elderly black man dying of the same disease. Mom and both thought “Oh Lord no!” But dad looked up at us and reached over and took that old man’s hand. And the two of them sat there holding hands. Thirty hours later he was dead. God’s healing, grace filled power poured down on my father and the whole family was caught in the wake. We discovered that my father was not the only locus of our family dysfunction. Our family equilibrium was disrupted and we had the opportunity for healing.

It seems easier to cling to the demons of our own making and to lock ourselves in the tombs of our past. Healing is hard. The only thing harder is refusing to heal. It is painful to step in to the light of God’s love, all our wounds for the world to see, but much, much worse to live in the darkness. Living into the new life of a healed redeemed human being is the journey set before all of us.

We are all imperfect human beings who have received the light of Christ. We are all called take that light into the world and proclaim what God has done for us. I not asking you to stand on a street corner with a sign. You can if you want to. But I am saying that the life that we

live is our expression of “the Light of Christ.” How we love one another, how we love the world, our generosity, the choices we make, how we invite and welcome the stranger are all expressions of the “Light of Christ.”

Scripture is a gift. All scripture even the confusing, difficult demon, pig laden scriptures. Scripture is not to be explained into tameness or taken literally but a glorious mystery to be lived.

For me this Gospel reading, in all it’s strangeness, is first and last about love so great that no cost, even a herd of swine was too great to deny the possessed man his healing. This poor soul’s life was worth the disruption of the community equilibrium. All lives matter. All lives are worth healing, no matter what the cost. And proclaiming all that God has done for us is worth it no matter what the cost.

When I dismiss us at the end of the service – I really mean it for you and for myself – to go forth in the name of Christ proclaiming all that God has done for us. Amen.