

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

June 24, 2007

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost - Proper 7

In the Name of our ever creating, loving and sustaining God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Gospel reading from today shows Jesus and his disciples arriving on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. It had been an eventful voyage – you may remember it. It is when Jesus fell asleep in the boat and the disciples had to wake Jesus up to tell him there was a raging storm and the boat was about to be swamped. Luke tells us that “Jesus rebuked the wind and the raging waves” and they became calm. The disciples then ask themselves the question that carries us into this week’s lesson – “Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and water, and they obey him?” It is a question, I think, which each of us asks at various points in our lives – “Who, then, is this?”

It is important to note that in going to the Eastern side of the Lake, they were going into Gentile territory, an area that had different traditions and different cultures. It was an area heavily influenced by Greco-Roman rather than Hebrew culture. They received a most bizarre welcome as they stepped ashore. They were greeted by a naked man who lived in the tombs of the dead and who was possessed by demons. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and asked “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me.” Luke explains that Jesus, upon encountering this poor soul, had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of him. Jesus asks the spirits name and is told “Legion” because, “many demons had entered him.” The spirits beg Jesus not to consign them to the bottomless pit but request to enter

into a herd of pigs grazing nearby. Jesus, consents, and the spirits enter the pigs and the herd then is compelled to rush into the lake where they drown. (I often wonder what the owner of the herd thought?)

Before we get to what the neighbors thought of this, we have to ask ourselves: What do we think of it? For Luke and other 1st century people, regardless of religion or culture, this would seem a totally appropriate and sensible story. Indeed, many peoples today who come from non-Western culture would find this story literally true. They inhabit a world of invisible spirits who can cause havoc and harm or who can do good. It is their world view.

We who have grown up in the Western culture would look first to natural causes or to medicine or emotional or social causes to explain calamities and disorders. However, even in our culture we see events like the Holocaust or the recent rise in irrational and self-destructive terrorism and we are compelled to see evil – whatever other name we may call it.

The two interesting things about this story to me are what Jesus accomplishes and the reactions of others to it. Luke's story goes into great detail to describe this poor man's condition – his nakedness, his living with the dead, his demonic strength, the fear of his townspeople and their attempts to restrain him – to no avail. Here is a person who has lost all control over himself and has even lost his own identity; he is made by his neighbors to be a menacing outcast from society. Whatever the causes of his great distress, the point remains that his encounter with God through Jesus Christ cured him and made him again whole. Jesus has shown his power over the spirit world as well as his power over nature. Here Jesus gave the man back his identity and restored him to community.

I think we can all take some comfort in that. However great our advances in science and medicine may be, we always need the care of our Creating, loving and sustaining God. I think we delude and limit ourselves if we allow our confidence in our scientific knowledge to squeeze God out of the picture. Similarly, I think other non-Western cultures delude and limit themselves if they do not allow reason and knowledge to enter their frames of reference.

The swine herders who witnessed the event told the townspeople who came and verified that the demon possessed man had been cured and was now clothed and in his right mind. Their reaction was not faith and acceptance but fear and exclusion; they asked Jesus to leave. The man who had been helped, asked to go with Jesus, but Jesus sent him away with a commission: “Return home and tell how much God has done for you.” So the man went away and did so.

We are witnessing in our own society and in the world religious, cultural, economic and environmental conflicts that at times seem unprecedented. In many ways this reflects the conflicts and divisions that the early Church faced. Paul in his letter to the Galatians tells of a conflict in the early Church where one party thought that people had to become Jews and be circumcised and live according to the Levitical Code in order to be considered followers of Jesus and admitted into the Christian community. Paul and his followers, on the other hand, believed otherwise, arguing that faith in Jesus Christ erased the prior separations caused by the Law. So that when it comes to being Church, regardless of what the outside world might think, there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for we all are one in Christ Jesus.

This was a difficult issue for the church to resolve since so much of culture established boundaries that separated people, limited people to expected roles and empowered others to enforce the rules. In chapter 2 of this letter to the Galatians (just before our reading of today), Paul goes face to face with Peter in public at Antioch and accuses him of hypocrisy. Peter was quite content to eat with the Gentiles until some people came from Jerusalem who belonged to James' group. When James' people were there to observe and report, Peter separated from the Gentiles. Paul noted that the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Paul's closest associate Barnabas was led astray.

It took a long time for this issue to be resolved; some would say that the controversy continues. So you see, conflict between churches and among bishops is nothing new – it goes back to the earliest days of the Church. Truth be told, our world is replete with these issues, not just the Church.

Jesus ordered the many demons that denied that man his identity and dignity to leave him. The response was both fear and faith, exclusion or inclusion. That is still the choice we all face when we encounter change. When Jesus told the young man to go and tell what God has done for him, maybe he was speaking to all of us. I think Jesus is saying that witnessing to God's grace is the best form of preaching.

I'd like to encourage each of us to do this by telling a story two people of beset by many demons. It was early 1989, Jim was recently hired to work in the claims department of the company where I was the Senior Vice President and General Counsel. I really didn't know him; I met him once when he was being taken around and introduced. He had been in and out of work for a while and finally ended up at Cabrini Hospital in New York for a very long stay. He wanted no visitors. My first partner

Eddie had been diagnosed at that hospital in 1986 with a disease that later acquired a name – AIDS – and he had recently died – facts I had to conceal at work. I put 2 and 2 together and when I was bringing communion to a parishioner from my home parish in NJ who was on the same AIDS floor as Jim. I decided to visit Jim whether or not he wanted to see people from the company. When I entered the room and introduced myself, I saw a look of fear come over him. His partner was sitting with him and he too was frightened. I thought, “Oh my God, he thinks I am here to fire him.” When I explained the situation and my history with that hospital, both he and his partner were overcome with emotion. At last, they were no longer alone. At last someone saw Jim and not a diagnosis. Finally, someone would sit with them and not be afraid to touch them (remember that was almost 20 years ago). I really didn’t do anything other than screw up the courage to walk into a room and share with someone how much God had done for me. You see, when I was alone and the world was an even more hostile place, it was St. George’s Episcopal Church in Maplewood, NJ, that opened its doors and its arms to welcome me. Fear left and faith entered. That, my brothers and sisters, is the mission of the Church.

Amen.

Amen.