

**Sermon, Father William J. Albinger**

**Sunday, June 20, 2010**

**Fourth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Proper 7C 2010**

In the Name of our one living God who is always with us wherever and however we may be: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's readings are examples of how I came to love the Bible. They are exciting stories of real people and their human characters and problems from thousands of years ago. In our first reading from the 1<sup>st</sup> Book of Kings, we again encounter that great early prophet Elijah. He's not having one of his best days. In fact he's having a day like most of us have had one time or another. We find him sitting under a lone tree a day's walk into the wilderness hoping to just lie down and die there. In short, he's just had it; he has reached his limits and he wants to give it all up. That's surprising since he is just returning from his greatest triumph – the defeat of Jezebel's prophets of Baal and their capture and destruction.

I don't know what got into him, but he has lost his identity; he has lost his sense of purpose. Was it Jezebel's threats that made him loose his nerve? Lord knows she's a piece of work and would scare anyone. Maybe after the stress of his match with his opponents, he was spent. Whatever happened, Elijah was at the low point of his sense of self worth. Why do I exist? Why bother? Most of get there at one time or another in our lives. But God would have none of it. Angels give him sustenance so that he can walk another 40 days into the wilderness of the Sinai to Horeb where Moses

met God. But God was there also for Elijah as he hid in his cave of doubt and despair.

The Lord simply asks, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” When Elijah complains, God just listens. God doesn’t argue or judge. God is vulnerable enough to show himself to Elijah, again asking, ”What are you doing here Elijah”. Now Elijah really lets loose with his pent-up frustration. God again simply listens and then tells him to get on with it because I have a job for you. Even when he seemingly has lost all hope and faith, God calls him again.

Elijah feels burnt out, inadequate, and perhaps unappreciated. It’s no fun being a prophet. It’s no fun faces enormous obstacles and threats and not seeing much change for better. I think we have all been there. But the lesson in this is that God is with us in our bad times too, not just our joyful or successful times. We may lose hope; we may lose faith – but God does not give up on us! The text brings up many reminders of Moses – the 40 years in the wilderness, Mount Horeb, the earthquake and fire. But Elijah isn’t Moses. He isn’t having a Charlton Heston moment. Elijah is not in an in charge mode. And yet, God is there - present in the silence of Elijah’s doubt and pain. That knowledge was enough to get Elijah moving again - towards Damascus where he was to anoint a new King and his own successor as a prophet. God knows of Elijah’s frustration, but God won’t let him give into it. God again calls Elijah knowing full well of his fears and his pain. I don’t know about you, but I think God’s call gets heard best when we feel small, hurt and vulnerable. Maybe the deep silence was the peace in simply knowing that God was there.

In our Gospel lesson, we see another person at the limits of his existence. Jesus lands with his disciples on the other side of the Sea of

Galilee - where the Gentiles lived. He encounters a man barely recognizable as human. In Jesus' time it was common belief that all sorts of disorders – physical, mental or emotional were caused by evil spirits that could invade and take over a person. Here was a man who was possessed by a legion of demons. The townspeople restrained him with chains. He lived naked and wild among the tombs of the dead. He was the ultimate outsider – rejected and restrained by the Gentile townspeople and considered totally impure and defiled under the Jewish Law.

This man also had lost his identity and his sense of purpose. He no longer knew who he was and the only identity he had was the one assigned to him by his neighbors.

Did you notice that it was the demons that immediately recognized the divine origin of Jesus? That is common in the Gospels. The forces of chaos are the first to recognize the Power greater than they. They immediately defer to Jesus and seek to negotiate the terms of surrender. They are willing to be expelled but not destroyed. That was the common understanding of demons – they could only be displaced but they still remained at large. Here the pigs carry them to total destruction.

What was the townspeople's reaction? They were terrified and begged Jesus to leave them alone. I would have thought that they would want to keep Jesus around. You would think seeing that man restored to health would fill them with joy, but it terrified them! Why? I think because it challenged their view of how the world worked and offered the prospect of change. They were forced to see a whole human being in what they knew to be the impure defective one who had to be kept outside chained among the dead.

Did you notice that the healed man wanted to follow Jesus but was told instead to go home? Jesus returns him to his community. Why? Doesn't Jesus always say, "Follow me!"? Actually in the Gospels Jesus sends a lot of people he has healed back home. They become by their very existence as people healed and made whole - witnesses to the power of Jesus. Their wellness challenges the beliefs of those who would make them less than fully human.

Encountering someone who has been transformed and made whole by the power of God is a challenge to any society or culture that is self-centered and self-reliant. It challenges our sense of how the world works. When we see God's power at work, it challenges our false sense of certainty and control. Recognizing a Power greater than ourselves is frightening. Christ exceeds our expectations and shatters our categories.

Later on in Luke, Jesus returns to that place. The witness of that former demoniac – his being recognized and accepted as a complete human being – change that place. On this second visit, Jesus was swamped by people carry those who needed healing.

Paul talks of this in Galatians. In Christ, our categories are shattered. It's not that differences cease, but instead we are able to transcend them. In Christ we are able to see beyond our categories, beyond our judgments and fears, to see our common humanity in the other. Differences are included within a greater unity.

These lessons challenge us. Who do we feel we have to constrain or put outside the walls of our town? When we look at someone what do we see? Have we ever encountered someone transformed by the love of God who challenges our categories? I have and I'd like to tell you about it.

Behind my office building when I worked in New York City, there was a huge and impressive church – St. Bartholomew’s. I got to know Judy, one of the priests there who did a lot of work with the local homeless and with the unchurched. One Sunday morning she had a heart attack on the church steps just before the 9AM service and she died on the way to Lenox Hill Hospital. People were devastated.

Her funeral was on Thursday morning and the church, huge though it was, was packed. Her friend Judy Collins sang Amazing Grace. Just as her oldest son had finished the eulogy, a tall figure dressed all in black stated walking up the center aisle. Is he a man or a woman? people asked of the African American gliding towards Judy’s casket. What is he doing? What is going to happen? No one moved. Her son stood silent still at the lectern. All eyes were on this person as she or he put one hand on her heart and the other on Judy’s casket, then blew a kiss and walked out the north transept door onto 51<sup>st</sup> Street.

I realized that unknown person carried every division that existed in the community and city up that aisle with her – questions of race, class, gender, mental health and homelessness. There were so many barriers to that person but not with Judy and not at St. Bartholomew’s Church. Through Judy and the Church that person knew that there was a place for all at Jesus’ table.

Paul may be the great Apostle to the Gentiles, but I think this unnamed Gerasene was the first! That is our job description also. Judy Bauer and St. Bart’s lived it out and so shall we. Amen.