

“One in Christ”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, June 19, 2016
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost**

Readings from Scripture: Luke 8:26-39 and Galatians 3:23-28

Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As Jesus stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me”--for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man; (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them entered these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

Luke 8:26-39

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:23-28

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, I pray that your word of scripture would come alive for us today; that we would hear of your work of liberation where demons are set free and people are made whole, where fear is overcome and where you and our faith in you erase the divisions that keep us apart from our neighbors. I pray that the words that you have laid upon my heart this day would become the Gospel, the true and living word of goodness, your goodness offered to us and to all people through the faithful acts of our Lord Jesus Christ. Be

with us as we open our hearts and minds, imaginations and faith to this word, and may it be faithfully proclaimed now and always. Amen.

Before I begin my sermon, I would invite the fathers among us to please stand on this Fathers' Day that we might recognize you. (applause) Happy Fathers' Day. And may this day continue to be happy for you and for us all.

This week has been a difficult week. This week my usual joyful task of sitting before the biblical passage and waiting for the Spirit to kind of lift up some message to proclaim has, to be honest, been anything but joy filled. I have had difficulty listening to the text of Paul's letter to the Galatians and to the Gospel reading in the aftermath of the shooting at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando. I have had difficulty listening for the good news of God which bubbles up week after week as I spend time in quiet, considering the great texts of the Bible because of the anguish of yet another mass shooting and the weight that it places upon my heart. I have had a difficult week listening for the message of peace and hope and love when so many, even some of those who profess a faith in our beloved Jesus, continue to preach hate and condemnation of those of the LGBTQ community. I have had difficulty this week listening for God's still, small voice--that whisper, that gentle whisper, when too much of the rhetoric in our country is filled with the demons of bigotry, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia and too many other kinds of fear. I have asked myself time and again this week, *who are we and how must we act?* I have asked myself again and again this week, in the face of so much fear-mongering, intolerance, hatred and terror, and in the shadow of a single gunman killing 49 people at a gay nightclub in Orlando, who are we and how must we act if we believe ourselves to be followers of Jesus Christ, and if we truly believe that all people--all people--are welcomed and loved and forgiven and fed and made new again and again by God and by us here as the Spirit empowers us at First Pres in Kirkwood.

Who are we and how must we act, here at our beloved First Pres, as the world continues to reach out in love and support and solidarity to the family and friends of those killed in Orlando, to the survivors who provided aid and comfort to the wounded, to the heroic first responders who put their lives on the line to save the lives of others, to a community that feels persecuted and unwelcomed and even to faithful Muslims everywhere who seek only peace. Who are we and how must we act?

As we find ourselves yet again in the valley of the shadow of death, I found myself this week turning to scripture to answer these two basic questions. Who are we and how must we act? I first turned to the text of our familiar prayer, *Our Father who art in heaven*. We pray each Sunday and many of us pray throughout the week this familiar prayer and the line that came to mind was *Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. We pray that God's heavenly desires will be displayed before us and that we will participate in them now here on earth. And as I was sitting with this passage, I realized that the beloved John 3:16 says that *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life*. There is part of me that thinks that if John had it over again he would have added *right here, right now on earth*. But the promise of Jesus is not for when we die only, but it is a promise that we live out day by day in our actions, our words and our deeds. We are charged to bring about eternal life right here, right now.

And then I turned to my beloved Luke, first chapter, eighth verse: *And the angel came to Mary and to us all and said 'Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you.'* When others in our faith turn to passages in Leviticus to find material for their sermons, I want to go to Luke. And I want to remind you all that the angel of God comes not just to Mary but to us all. The messenger proclaims not just to the one but to the many, *Greetings, favored ones, the Lord is with you*. This is a promise and a reality that is ours by faith and trust in the work and witness of Jesus Christ. In the face of so much fear-mongering and hatred, where words become acted out in terror and where it seems that common sense is missing, when the country seems to be so addicted

to the message of fear and we need to be afraid of this and that, I go to John and actually to Jesus who says *Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not let them be afraid.* I need to hear Jesus remind me when I watch the news or read the news and learn of some new story of horror and terror, I need to hear Jesus say again and again in the echos of my soul *I do not give to you as the world gives. Peace I leave with you. My peace--my peace--I give to you, to all of you. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.*

And then there's that crazy apostle named Paul who writes to his beloved church in Galatia, a community of faith that he established long ago and is now being troubled--where the divisions are being lifted up by those who have come to pervert and distort the Gospel. Paul writes to them and says *now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to disciplinarians for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. There is no longer Jew or Greek. There is no longer slave or free. There is no longer male and female. All of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

And then when I find myself getting angry at what I hear and what I see, again I need to hear the words of Jesus echo in my soul. *But I say to you that listen, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*--possibly the hardest message for us to embrace in the Gospel of Matthew. These verses are material for all of us to meditate upon, to read, to ponder, to pray and to use as we face and confront those in our circle of influence who may believe that the Bible does not command us to love our neighbors as ourselves. And I believe that they also provide us with some answers to the questions: Who are we and how must we act? Who are we according to this collection of Bible passages? We are a people who pray, who are committed to the act of prayer and trust that the Spirit of God is still alive and at work among us, with us and through us. We are a people who welcome others into our communion of fellowship. We are a people of peace who are unafraid of what is going on in the world. We are a people drawn together by the Spirit, an open community of welcome for all people who hunger to know of their own salvation and love and forgiveness and who want a second, third, fourth, fifth or twenty-fifth chance to try again. We are a people who love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and we are a people who love our neighbors as ourselves as we provide care and comfort to those around us--food for the hungry, shirts and dresses for those who need shelter, schools for those who need to be educated, water for those who are thirsty. This is what we are called to do as we are a people who love our neighbors as ourselves. And we are a people, although it's difficult, who are called to love those who persecute us for our trust in a loving God who welcomes all people. As we welcome among us the rich and the poor, the slave and the free, the male and the female, the gay and the straight, the republican, the democrat, the libertarian, the green party, the independents--as we welcome Jew and Greek and immigrants from any other foreign land--even Kansas--we are called here to be one in Christ.

And now, how must we act? We must continue the work of loving all people. We must continue to welcome all people into our community of faith. We must continue to love our neighbors and assure them that they are loved. And we must stand and speak against all forms of fear and violence and bigotry and hatred and intolerance that seeks to terrorize us and our neighbors. We need to simply say "enough". And we must stand and speak against all forms of fear and violence and bigotry and hatred and intolerance that seek to destroy our trust--our trust--in a loving and gracious God who welcomes all people into the family of faith. Amen.