

Luke 8.26-39
Galatians 3.23-29
12th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ann J. Deibert
Central Presbyterian Church
24 June 2007

(A disclaimer: This sermon was written to be spoken, which does not always translate into correct grammatical form for a document written to be read.)

More Light Sundays

This morning I want to return to Timothy Tyson's book. I quoted from it last week and as I finished reading it this week there was another piece in it that seemed connected to today's story from Luke.

Tyson's book, *Blood Done Sign My Name*, is both personal reflection and researched history about the killing of a black man by three white men in 1970 in Oxford, North Carolina. Tim Tyson was a ten-year old boy living down the street from the man and his sons who did the killing. Tyson writes about what happened in Oxford, North Carolina and what happened in other parts of our country in the late 1960's and early 1970's.

"The social changes wrought by the black freedom movement," writes Tyson, "came about by a complex mixture of violence and nonviolence, economic coercion and moral appeal." Of course we know that those social changes were not welcomed by everyone. That the victories of the movement "generated a great deal of fear and resentment should surprise no one." Tyson quotes James Baldwin, who said in 1963 (using, as people did in those days, "man" to mean "men and women"): "The black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar, and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations." "And so one of the major-by-products of the freedom struggle, in [Tyson's town of] Oxford and across the country, was a [fierce] white political backlash."¹

There's a piece of James Baldwin's quote that operates in our story this morning. The man in the story, tormented by demons, is kept in his place—among the tombs, naked, and under guard. Sometimes he was shackled and chained but he would break free and be driven by the demons into the wilderness. It must have been like being in hell to be this man.

But for the rest of the community at Gerasenes, this fearsome, demon-possessed man was contained. They didn't need to worry about him very much because he was in his place. He was, as Baldwin said, "a fixed star...an immovable pillar." They knew where he was and could plan their route around him so they didn't run into him. So he didn't disrupt their routine. They probably still had to think about him—because he was still there—but they didn't have to spend all their time worrying about whether or not he would interfere in their daily work. They had their place in the community and he had his. And mostly things were as expected with nothing out of the ordinary.

Except that this man was tormented. He was homeless and naked. He wandered among the dead in the cemetery. The demons in him threw him to the ground.

And then here comes Jesus. The demons know who he is—even if no one else does. The man falls down before Jesus and shouts at the top of his lungs: "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me." The demons know what's

¹ Timothy B. Tyson, *Blood Done Sign My Name*, New York: Crown, 2004, p252-253.

up—they know they don't stand a chance with Jesus. Jesus sees the man as he is meant to be; Jesus sees the man and sees his true self; he sees the man whole. And he sends the demons into a herd of pigs and the pigs rush down a steep embankment and are drowned in the lake.

The pig farmers spread the news to the people in town and they come rushing out to see what happened.

Now you might expect that people would be happy. Certainly it's likely this man who had the demons was related to someone in town—he must have been someone's son, someone's uncle, someone's brother. You'd think a cheer might go up; a feast celebrated; new clothes brought and a room prepared for this man who is now healed. Freed of what tormented him, he was now “in his right mind” the story tells us.

But that is not the response. The people who have known this man are filled with fear and they ask Jesus to leave. Surprising?

Perhaps this is not so surprising. The people have spent considerable energy in managing the location of this fearsome, strange, unknown, terrifying man—they know where he lived, what he did, they guarded him, kept track of him. And they could think of all those frightening forces as being “over there,” in “that” man.

When Jesus heals the man, “now the power of God for good comes to their community and it disturbs a way of life they had come to accept.” Fred Craddock says, “Even when it is for good, power that can neither be calculated nor managed is frightening. What will God do next in our community?”²

Even when it keeps people from their true selves—who God created them to be—it's much easier to segregate people in one place—to compartmentalize and say, “those strange people over there.” It's more manageable when we can say the thing that makes us uncomfortable is located in a specific place out there—and certainly not here—in the community we know—or here—inside ourselves.

The people in Gerasenes were not praising God because the man with multiple demons had been healed, they were wondering what it was going to cost them—in addition to the herd of pigs they have lost, what change they were going to have to make, what uncertainty they were going to have to live with now. That fixed star was no longer in one place. The immovable pillar was now moveable. And there was a fierce backlash.

Being a follower of Jesus means living with that kind of change and uncertainty. Being a follower of Jesus means delighting when people are made whole even if it makes us uncomfortable. It means living on the edge between what's cultivated and what's wild. It means letting go of control and falling into God's astonishing grace and wildly inclusive love.

That's what being a more light congregation is all about too. It isn't just about welcoming people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender—although that's the starting point. It's about living on the edge where we're not always comfortable. It's about following Jesus and celebrating when people are made whole—even if they are people who frighten us.

Because once you stand on the edge between what's cultivated and what's wild—what's prescribed and what's unknown—then you realize there's a whole landscape of people who have been run out of town so that life in town can go on smoothly and predictably. Being a more light congregation means taking the good news of God's wonderfully welcoming and liberating love

² Fred Craddock, *Luke*, Westminster John Knox, p117.

into the places of our lives, our community and our world, where religious organizations, that are focused on maintaining their institutional life, too often fear to tread.

In 1620, Pastor John Robinson, said goodbye to Pilgrims preparing to cross the Atlantic ocean from Holland to make a new life in a new land. Part of Robinson's charge to the pilgrims was to look for, and be ready to receive, God's revelation, for he was certain that God had more truth and more light to break forth out of God's holy Word. More light congregations follow in that tradition, looking for what God is doing anew and the new place God is leading us.

Or another way to say it is as George MacLeod, the founder of the Iona Community said, "Follow the light you have and pray for more light."

That's what it is to be a more light congregation—to follow the light and pray for more light. To open the door and then find there are more and more doors that need opening. Back in 1983, we became a more light congregation by making a statement of our commitment to work for the full participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people of faith in the life, ministry and witness of the Presbyterian Church (USA). That was the first step on the road. But it's not the end of the journey.

You know, when you discover more light in God's Word and you experience what it's like when you are made whole, you can't go back and pretend it never happened. You can only go on, following the light you know and praying for more light.

So while we celebrate being a more light congregation on this Sunday in Gay Pride month, really, we celebrate More Light Sundays all through the year as we set our hearts and minds, our hands and feet to following the One who sets people free, who sets a place at the table for every single person—even the ones run out on a rail to live in the places of death and despair. We celebrate More Light Sundays all through the year as we set our hearts and minds, our hands and feet to following the One who has set us free, the One in whom we have experienced a love that breaks open our hearts and who welcomes every person as part of God's beloved family.