

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 5th Sunday After Pentecost, June 19, 2016

The Bay of Pigs
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys
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Galatians 3:23-29 Luke 8:26-39

I have to begin this message with a confession. I stole the title of today's sermon from one given by the Rev. Edyth Pruitt three years ago on the same scripture passages. Why? I just liked it and it is very appropriate, particularly when considering the scripture reading from Luke about the man who was possessed by demons.

Both of our scripture readings today are about acceptance, but in 180 degree opposite ways.

In Galatians we read, *"So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God ... There is neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."*

Jesus excludes no one, but many Christians do exclude others, often because of how they look, how they are dressed, how they act, where they came from, and so forth. We tend to be judgmental of others. We don't seem to trust those who are "different" --- those who are not like us.

Our scripture reading from Luke is an extreme example of a person not being accepted --- so much so that he was totally rejected by society. He was an outcast and was forced to live in a cemetery. He was demon possessed. He was mad and was rejected. In fact he had been chained up multiple times but managed to break his chains and escape. He was naked and alone when Jesus found him.

How would you react if you saw a naked, dirty, angry man who lived in a cemetery? Most people would give him a wide berth and likely would call the police.

"9-11. What is your emergency?"

"There is a naked wild man living in the cemetery. Do something."

Well Jesus did something, something that angered the people. He exorcised the demons that possessed the man.

To understand this you need to understand what it meant to be demon

possessed in the first century. In that time, a demon was considered to be an unclean spirit or even a fallen angel. A demon was believed to be a spiritual entity, a malevolent force which could inhabit a person or animal. Demons the work of Satan. They were feared and anyone who was believed to possess a demon was rejected by society.

Whenever anyone suffered from mental illness or epilepsy or just acted in a non-conventional way, they were believed to be possessed by demons.

People recognized physical illness but not mental illness. Physical illness might be able to be cured, and Jesus did cure many people. But mental illness was another thing altogether --- it was caused by demons and a way had to be found to exorcise those demons, to make them leave the possessed individual --- and no one really knew how to do that, but they tried.

Demonic possession stories appear throughout both the Old and New Testaments. In 1 Samuel 16:14 we read that King Saul was tormented by an evil spirit from the Lord.

Solomon is reported in 1 Kings as driving out demons and similar stories appear elsewhere in scripture.

Exorcists tried rituals, incantations and spells, potions and magical objects to drive out demons. Jesus was different. He didn't use any of these things. He just commanded the demons by his own authority and they immediately submitted.

The Zondervan Bible Backgrounds Commentary ⁽¹⁾ said that Jesus' "... *exorcisms are not meant as showy demonstrations of his magical arts, but to confirm the in-breaking of the kingdom of God in his words and deeds. When the Lord's Messiah arrives, the forces of Satan are confronted and overcome.*"

Jesus asks the man his name. The demons answer "Legion," meaning that there were a lot of them. A legion of Roman soldiers numbered about 6000 men, so the name implied an incredible number of demons.

The possessed man had no name or identity. He was a total outcast. The people kept trying to catch him and chain him up. He was the worst of the worst in their eyes and here comes Jesus.

He doesn't avoid the man. He comes and talks to him and orders the demons to leave him. He then orders the demons to enter a herd of swine that stampedes over a cliff and into the lake.

There you had the original "Bay of Pigs."

Yes, I know that it is a bad joke but it is symbolic, at least for Jews. Pigs were unclean animals. They were despised and a herd of pigs drowning in the lake had great meaning in the culture of the region. The Jewish Christians would have immediately understood and applauded the disposal of demons in this way.

But the problem in our story is that it took place not in Judea but in the region of the Gerasines, a gentile area. The pigs were owned by gentile swineherds. Those pigs were valuable to them and that is likely why the people rejected Jesus. His act of exorcising the man took away their livelihood, made them fearful, and they asked him to leave.

The man who had been cured and somehow clothed by Jesus asked to stay with him. Jesus told him to go home and to declare what God had done for him, and he did. We don't know how people reacted to the man's return.

What would you do or think if someone who you had rejected came back into the community? Would you accept him and listen to him or would your prejudices still be there? How do we learn to trust and accept someone who we previously rejected? Do we trust him or do we figuratively want to drive him off to live in the cemetery?

What about someone who committed a crime, was jailed, served his time, and came back? Would you trust him or her?

What about someone who was addicted to drugs or alcohol --- perhaps even a member of your own family? Would you willingly accept him or her back or would you hesitate?

In today's world, many people are afraid of immigrants, particularly those from the Near East. Could they be terrorists? Can we trust them? Should we trust them?

We all have demons --- fear of the past --- fear of the unknown --- fear of rejection. It goes on and on.

Jesus accepted everyone --- sinners, tax collectors, those who were demon possessed --- everyone.

Can we accept those who have changed? Those who are different? Those who are guilty by association? Can we do it?

Jesus would not have it any other way.

Amen.

1. Clinton E. Arnold, ed., Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, Vol. 1, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI., 2002

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011