

Proper 7 - 4 Pentecost – Year C – June 20, 2010
1 Kings 19:1-15a; Psalm 43; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39
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Michael Oher now plays tackle for the Baltimore Ravens NFL football team. The story of his teenage years and road to the NFL is portrayed dramatically in the movie, *The Blind Side*. After Michael is admitted as a student at a Christian school, a wealthy businesswoman, whose own children also attend the school sees Michael walking aimlessly in freezing rain wearing only a T-shirt and shorts. The Touhys bring Michael into their home for the night and then extend an invitation for him to stay for Thanksgiving dinner. It becomes apparent that Michael is homeless. The family learns that he grew up on the other side of town in the drug-infested and violent projects. His father is dead and his crack-addicted mother lost her children to the foster care system years before. Michael has spent several years in a variety of foster homes, but always runs away. At lunch with a group of friends, Mrs. Touhy broaches the subject of the projects. The desperation and need there seeps into the air from across the city, like a noxious mushroom-shaped cloud and the invisible but deadly radiation of an atomic bomb. Mrs. Touhy is not the kind of woman who takes “no” for an answer. She knows that God’s saving grace has no limits, and no one is beyond the reach of Christ’s redeeming and healing love.

Religious, social and economic divides are so commonplace across the country that we rarely pay close attention until something disastrous happens. Remember the L.A. race riots that exposed the on-going tragedy of racial discrimination, or Hurricane Katrina that lit a national spotlight on the glaring economic abyss between the rich and the poor in Louisiana. Here on the Mountain the American-Indian reservations are perhaps the most obvious definition of a distinct socio-economic and cultural boundary. Yet even a cursory glance at many of the neighborhoods in this area will tell us that they are significantly impacted by drug and alcohol addiction, as well as child and spousal abuse, to name just a few of the modern-day demons that roam unchecked across society. Intellectually at least, most of us are willing to acknowledge that with the deep cuts in social services effected years ago, and the closure of many residential psychiatric facilities, there are also massive gaps in the care of the mentally ill. Many who suffer from mental illness become homeless and are unable to hold down a job. These people are particularly at risk from all forms of violence including beatings, rape, and even murder. Yet repeatedly in Scripture, and in our Baptismal covenant we are reminded that all these children of God are our neighbors.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus has gone across a great physical and religious divide to set foot in the region of the Gerasenes. It is gentile territory, unclean for a Jewish man like Jesus. Everything from the man running around naked and raving in the tombs, possessed by unclean spirits, to the local pig farming industry tells us that Jesus is not in Kansas anymore. Just like Mrs. Touhy’s forays into the disturbing underworld of the projects to offer salvation and healing for one young man, Jesus is also offering salvation to the man who meets his boat. Like so many confrontations in the world today, Jesus faces a power struggle, and the Gospel message – which is faith in action – will face strong opposition, because the good news is not just a personal spiritual matter, but a way of life, with economic consequences.

As Luke tells the story, the man possessed by demons meets Jesus as he steps onto shore. The power struggle begins immediately. “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” Even when ordinary men and women fail to recognize Jesus as God’s Son, the demons always know they are in the presence of great power when Jesus is around. There are two things we need to be reminded of here to make sense of this dialogue. In ancient Middle-eastern demonology, evil spirits cannot survive in water – but dwell in the waterless regions of the abyss. Secondly, to know another being’s name was to have power over them. Jesus asks for, and receives, the name of the demon. It is “Legion”, because the demons are many, emphasizing the grand scale of this power struggle. Furthermore, Luke never lets us forget the political undercurrent running throughout his gospel account, with the constant juxtaposition of Jesus, our Savior and

Lord, the true Son of the Most High God, against the ruling powers of the day, including the Judean leaders who align themselves with Rome. Ironically, the Roman Emperors also took for themselves the title “Most High God”, and had legions of fighting men under their command. Luke’s story unfolds with great drama. Jesus permits the unclean spirits to enter the unclean pigs, which then immediately race to their destruction in the lake. Jesus’ authority and power over the demons is absolute. The man’s salvation is assured, or in other words, he is freed from the demons that possessed and controlled his life.

The word, ‘salvation’ has such a broad usage these days that its original meaning has become blurred and weighed down with a lot of baggage including guilt, or images of fiery torment in the depths of hell. For some, salvation is strictly black and white, and purely eschatological in tone. Accept Jesus by faith, and heaven awaits as your future reward. Reject Jesus and be doomed to the torments of hell. There is no subtlety or nuance in that understanding of salvation and there is even less of the original meaning from the Hebrew or the Greek in such scary pronouncements, as if any of us can decide the eternal fate of another. Jesus never tried to frighten or coerce anyone into faith, and probably even warned against the effectiveness of such behavior in the parable of the sower. In the Hebrew context, the primary meaning of salvation is deliverance or liberation from evil, rescue from danger, and our welfare in this life. In the Greek of the New Testament gospels, salvation is also intimately associated with our healing, as well as current and future deliverance from evil. We each live out our salvation as we put our faith into words and deeds today, and every day of our lives, even as we share the hope of the resurrection, and our eternal life in Christ.

It is worth giving serious thought and prayer to the significance of our freedom in Christ, as well as our healing and restoration to wholeness in this life. In the country of the Gerasenes, one man has been liberated and restored to health by Jesus. The man is ready to take up his life again in community with others, rather than suffer the terrible torment and deathly isolation of his wild existence alone amongst the tombs. Jesus empowers the man to witness to what God has done for him, as Jesus’ first gentile witness proclaiming salvation, healing and freedom for all. On the other hand, the destruction of the herd of pigs is economically catastrophic for the swine herders, who fear Jesus and ask Him to leave – probably, in their own minds adding, “Before you do any more damage”. You and I live out our faith in a world where pretty much everything has a price tag, and values have become strangely skewed towards the self-serving accrual of wealth and material goods, regardless of others. We live out our faith in a world where life is frequently considered just another disposable commodity available for sale and manipulation by governments, industries, and even individuals. The giant oil corporation, BP, is arguably the current epitome of such indifference, but by no means the only culprit. Accepting Christ’s healing and salvation is logical, but our fear and instinct may drive us in a different direction, as it does for the swine herders. Fear can indeed drive us to live lives that make no sense from the perspective of faith. Fleeing to the devil we know is often much more comfortable than engaging an unknown entity, being open to change, or transitioning to new life in Christ, especially if the consequences are economic as well as spiritual. Can we put a price on faith? What is the cost of discipleship?

When the great fourteenth-century mystic, Julian of Norwich, saw the redemption of Christ juxtaposed against the devil’s destructive power, she “laughed greatly,” for she saw that in the end the “fiend” would not prevail. Every wound and sorrow inflicted by wickedness would, in Christ, become a source of honor and glory as it was healed. All the wounds of the Gerasene demoniac become catalysts of redemption as the healed man goes among his people to tell them what God has done for him. When they could easily continue down the highway of life as juggernauts of the status quo, stifling growth and change and consolidating their own economic status, the Touhys live out their faith as catalysts of redemption and healing. Theirs is just one story. How will ours play out? At some point we all have to get out of the boat on the other side in order to show the world God’s love and compassion.

Amen.