

## *The Beloved Community*

Mark 5:2-17

A strange story, that one. Confusing to our contemporary mindset. Unclean spirits (aka demons and demons who have names), pigs jumping off cliffs, people begging Jesus to go away instead of sticking around to perform more miracles. Confusing!

Let's begin with demons. There are many interpretations as to what that could mean. Mental states that couldn't be medically or scientifically explained back 2000 years ago, maybe like epilepsy or a neurosis? The work of the devil? Something that is not around any more, or is it? Maybe it's like a severe depression, or addiction, or compulsion? Something we might know in ourselves or in those around us. Anyway if having a demon is being taken over by something destructive, Jesus is against it. He is against it and wants to free the man from his condition which has kept him in shackles and chains and in isolation living among the tombs. He wants to get rid of the demons (hence the pigs which were pretty unacceptable in their own right to Jews of Jesus' day – unclean to unclean). And no wonder the demons were afraid and angry – they recognize Jesus as a greater authority (the disciples may not always be so astute, but the demons certainly are) and they know they'll lose this battle.

And they do. Jesus mends the man; he returns him to his right mind. The demons are gone and sanity is restored. Mission accomplished. End of story?

Wait a minute. Let me read you a few more verses, at the end of the paragraph. Now the grateful man wanted to get into the boat and go with Jesus,

*but Jesus refused and said to him, "Go home to your friends,  
and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy  
he has shown you.*

*Go home. Go back to town and your friends.* This man who had been relegated to the tombs, outside the town, the place of the dead, the place where nobody wants to go or be...this man was now instructed to go back to his community and tell his story. Back to where he could be with people and share life with them.

There are many healing stories in the Gospels, and in them, Jesus does more than cure disease or drive out demons. He's after more than that because the healing is never fully accomplished until there is a restoration to community.\*

When the woman who has been hemorrhaging for many years is made well and the bleeding stopped, she can go back to her family and townsfolk, because her issue of blood has made her unclean and therefore unacceptable in the community life. She too has been relegated to the fringe of activity and relationships. Think of what that feels like after twelve long years to be allowed to go in peace back into the flow of life (Mark 5:25-34)

When the widow's son is raised from the dead, he is given back to the arms of his mother where he belongs (Luke 7:12-15). How good is that!

When the leper is healed of his skin disease, he is free to return to the community which has ostracized him and kept him at a distance for fear of contamination. Now he is instructed to go show the priests, go to the holiest ones, go to the center of the religious community and give testimony. That is about as public as you can be in the presence of your neighbors, your community (Luke 5: 12-16).

In the Jesus business, community is always, always, a part of healing. Even though community is never perfect.\*

So what is this *community* that Jesus so values and urges upon us?

Back in the 60's Martin Luther King, Jr. talked a lot about the *beloved community* in terms of a society based on justice, equal opportunity and love of one's fellow human beings, for all people regardless of their color or race. He exhorted inclusivity and economic and social justice, a community where all are embraced and none discriminated against. He was drawing on the political realities of the times, but on Scripture too. For King was first and foremost a preacher, and the Bible is full, overflowing full, of descriptions of what the Kingdom and its earthly manifestations will look like.

King may have brought the term *beloved community* into contemporary awareness, but he did not originate the vision. It came long before his day in terms of God's purposes for Israel, and in Jesus' earthly ministry as to what could be and should be in the Kingdom of Heaven, and in the apostle Paul's outreach to Jews and Gentiles calling them into the Body of Christ, a blessed and beloved community. An old yet continually being newly created body, an already but not yet gathering of beloveds.

In this day and age we can, and often do, choose to belong to many communities. We can join a group of like-minded people in a political party. We can pay dues to belong to a golf club and hang out with other athletes or would-be athletes. We can participate in an association of our neighbors, or the alumnae of our college, or the compassion club, based on our love of animals, or the Lions or Rotary with its do-gooder works. The opportunities are endless – and good. They can be very good in their goals and efforts.

But life in the Beloved Community of the church, which is now my focus, our focus, is different, and marked by different set of values and purposes, and recognizable by different allegiances and practices and commitments.

Theologians and believers have offered millions upon millions of thoughts and words about what the Christian church is all about. Let me offer just a couple of examples – just a couple so that we can get out of here today. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor, insists that we belong to each other through and in Jesus Christ, that we need each other because of Christ and that we come to each other through Christ, and through Christ we are chosen for eternity. Clearly Jesus Christ is central to the Beloved Community.\*\* Kathleen Norris, spiritual writer and

teacher, says that church is other people engaged not just in Sunday morning liturgies, but in all other acts of worship (such as Bible study or hammering nails on a mission project) where we are enmeshed in something important which transcends our feeble attempts at properly praising and praying. She reminds us that the church is both a human institution full of ordinary sinfulness and people who do and say crazy things, and a divinely inspired enterprise full of good purpose which partakes of a unity far greater than the sum of its parts.\*\*\* Divinely inspired and human. Human. That's us for sure.

Franciscan Father Richard Rohr invites us to think of the icons which mark the Church...Jesus on the cross, a wounded body – a symbol of how we wound ourselves and the world; and the empty cross, the resurrected body of Jesus, icon of God's promise, response, victory over crucifixion. We are both – wounded and recipients of the promises. We can't always, perhaps ever, make the church into what we think is right, into what meets our standards or ideal; we can only be grateful inheritors of what God has done for us in giving us brothers and sisters who live by God's call, forgiveness, and hope.\*\*\*\*

All well and good – these descriptions of the church as the Beloved Community. Perhaps a bit abstract or lofty. But why do we – you and I stay in it? What do we find here that keeps us committed or at least desirous of being committed?

I admit that there have been times, recently and over the years, that I have thought about taking my marbles and going home (or at least somewhere else). Just get outta here. I only thought about it momentarily, but there are a lot of places that it is easier to be, and a lot more comfortable to be, than in a church community which according to one observer is a bunch of “messed up people living in a messed up world with other messed up people, messing up on their own.” Kind of harsh, isn't it? But while church can be a place of strength and joy for followers of Jesus, even Jesus himself never said it would be easy to pick up your cross and follow him. In fact, he warned how hard it would be. But still I stay. Still we stay, most of us anyway, even in the fray and the messiness of a human yet more than human institution.

In fact, like some of the disciples who got discouraged yet replied when Jesus asked them if they wanted to leave, *Where would we go? To whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life (John 6:88).*

Exactly, exactly where would we go if we left?

I am taken with the reasons for holding fast that provocative Lutheran pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber, writes about in her book *Accidental Saints*, which I mentioned in my eSpire article this week. Her experiences aren't as lofty as a German theologian or a monastic monk might relate, but they strike me as honest, real and gutsy, and something we might confess to ourselves if we could be so frank. She finds her reasons to stay connected to God and the Blessed Community when....

she is confronted by the mercy of the gospel so much that she cannot hate  
her enemies

she is unable to judge the sin of someone else because her own sinfulness  
is too much in the way  
she has to bear witness to another human being's suffering despite her  
desire to be left alone  
when she is forgiven by someone even though she don't deserve it, and her  
forgiver does this because he, too, is trapped by the gospel. (I love that  
phrase *trapped by the gospel* – what a glorious damnable place to be –  
*trapped by the gospel*)

Nadia 's spirituality is most active in moments when....

traumatic things happen in the world and she has nowhere to place  
them to make sense of them, but she does have a group of people  
who gather with her every week who will mourn and pray with her  
over the devastation of something like a school shooting  
and when she ends up changed by loving someone she'd never choose  
out of a catalogue, but whom God sends her way to teach her about  
God's love Those darn *accidental saints!*\*

She stays, I stay, and most likely you stay too for some or all of those reasons too. Trapped by the gospel, confronted by mercy, forgiven and freed to forgive, engaging in spite of other instincts, caring even when we are weary, bound to one another even when we are angry and hurt, bolstered by others' faith and prayer, loving and loved by someone we would never choose on our own. What a crazy way to live! What a blessed way!

In this current time of concern and confusion at FCC, there have been hurts and wounds that seem too deep to be easily healed, and we grieve about that. But you have also seen grace-filled acts and sentiments in this community over the years and even in recent weeks. You've seen people reach out to others, admit mistakes, seek new insights, re-commit to old commitments, tend the sick, cheer the joyous, share a meal with sisters, struggle to mend the broken places, feel the pain, visit the lonely, welcome the stranger, tolerate, trust and speak the truth in love,. You have seen these, or if you haven't yet, look around you and listen, you will find them in this beloved community. I could name names but I won't because we do these not so much through our own efforts, sincere as they may be, but through the grace of God

who has the power to make all things new. Through the grace of God who used the killing of Jesus to redeem the world, who used the worst things to become the very best things, who declares that nothing is a permanent dead end, but that everything is capable of a new shape and meaning. We can come to this God not by doing everything right but sometimes by doing it wrong or inadequately and then responding to our failures and suffering with openness and awareness and trust that God still has the power to work wonders in our lives – to heal our wounds (and believe me, we have wounds and they are *Legion*) and to restore or keep us firmly in the beloved community, in *The Kingdom of Justice and Joy* (about which we just sang).

I end with the word of the Apostle Paul to the people of Ephesus and to you the brothers and sisters of First Congregational:

*Now to The One who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever. Amen.*

Sermon preached by Susan Power Trucksess

First Congregational Church in Branford

18 October 2015

Resources and References:

\* Nadia Bolz-Weber's *Accidental Saints*

\*\* Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*

\*\*\* Kathleen Norris' *Amazing Grace*

\*\*\*\* Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, (Oct. 16, 2015) *The Sacred Wound*