



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JUNE 23, 2019
ISAIAH 65:1-9; PSALM 22:18-27; GALATIANS 3:23-29; LUKE 8:26-39

REPARATIONS AND THE DEMONS OF OUR NATION

Luke 8:26-39 [Jesus and his disciples arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he 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 enter 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.]

This past Monday Kathy and I joined several others at a local theater to view the documentary film, Emanuel, a moving account of the tragic violence at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, where four years earlier to the day, Dylan Roof entered the church, joined the bible study circle and then opened fire on those who bowed their heads in prayer, killing

nine of them, all African-Americans. It was a hate crime.

You may remember the shocking story and the remarkable events that unfolded in the days that followed. The gunman was apprehended the next day in North Carolina, and confessed to the crime. His was a bitter hatred of white supremacy, and he had hoped that his heinous act would incite the racial tensions that lead to

rioting and more bloodshed. More division. More hatred.

But he did not account for the responses of the families of those he had murdered, and the film pivots away from being just another docudrama telling the backstories of those interviewed, and turns into their remarkable act of faith in the crucible of pain and loss.

On the 19th of June, just two days after their loved ones were murdered, Roof was arraigned and the judge made an impromptu and unusual invitation to the families gathered in the courtroom: Would you like to address Mr. Roof at this time?

Nadine Collier spoke first. She is a middle-aged black woman born and raised in the thick air of Charleston and its long legacy of racial strife and oppression. You killed my mama, but I forgive you. She said, “You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never, ever hold her again. But I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul...You hurt me...But if God forgives you, I forgive you.”

The sister of another woman killed said hers was a family that love built. “We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive.”ⁱ

I wept at raw power of their words. Ms Collier would go on later to say that they had no advance notice that the judge would invite them to speak, and when she did speak, it was not her speaking herself, but the God of her faith speaking through her. She would never have come to such words on her own.

I want that kind of faith!

I want to live in a community that practices our faith so passionately that in our darkest moments

we might be poised to allow God to speak through us.

I want to live in a world where such faith transforms not just the lives of those who are faithful, but transforms the world into a softer, gentler, more just, more peaceful world. I believe that is possible.

This is what the gospel reading this morning is really all about. Sure, at first glance it is about a man with mental illness whom Jesus heals. And there are some quirky parts thrown in to give us pause. Demonic shouting, crazy pigs flying off cliffs into the sea, the fear-driven response of some of the locals who see in Jesus so much power that they want him simply to leave. Divine presence is too much for some.

But leaving it there, as a story objectifying one man riddled with demons, would miss this story’s deeper truth penetrating the fabric of our lives here and now.

First, we are told that Jesus sails to the other side of the lake—from Galilee and its familiar comforts to the other side, to Gerasa, where the Others dwell and eke out an existence that is usurped by the empire.

Cultural redlining had long since forced the expulsion of the Others from the more fertile Galilean countryside to the southeast, across the lake, the other side of the tracks, where the craggy soil would grow thickets of brush and little else. Pigs could feed there and became the means of survival.

At best their pig herds would be sold to the imperial army for food; at worst the army would pass through and take the herds and anything else of value, killing any who stood in their way.

And in this community of outsiders there was one who, as symptom bearer and scapegoat, would be shackled and left amidst the tombs, his solitary confinement, stripped of his dignity.

Jesus crossed over to the other side and visited this man in his prison, and must have loved him, because the demons that haunted the man begged him to stop that—stop loving him into worthiness. Leave us alone; let us continue as we are.

Legion wanted the status quo. Legion, the term for a phalanx of Caesar's army, six thousand-strong. The epitome of power, the ruling party, the keepers of the peace—a peace maintained through brutal force. It is not peace when it is premised on the suffering of some for the benefit of others...when some must pass over the way that their tears have watered, when some must tread the path through the blood of the slaughtered.ⁱⁱ

This is not about a mentally ill man; leaving it there would let us off easy, leaving it there would jettison this story back into ancient history where we might wash our hands of it altogether. No, this story is about the injustice done to one group of people by another group of people and the horrendous effects that accumulate over time as a result of that oppression. They accumulate. This story echoes the kleptocracy that is our society today. This story is about the longstanding paradigm of injustice presented as peace because to envision a different path would require too much from too many, or so we might think.

Wednesday of this past week, four years after those family members of the Emanuel Nine spoke words of forgiveness to the one who violently took so much from them, Ta-Nehisi

Coates and others testified before Congress in support of a bill that would establish a committee to explore how reparations to descendants of slaves might be configured in this nation, a nation whose soil is soaked with the blood of too many whose skin color determined their “otherness.”

I know the issue of reparations is a controversial one, and to be clear, there are many ways to consider how reparations might be made. Direct



Figure 1 Ta-Nehisi Coates, Episcopal Bishop of Maryland Eugene Sutton, and others testify before Congress June 19, 2019

payments, or improved access to health care, or education, or housing. There is no real dispute that the economic, social and psychological effects of slavery have been passed down to every generation since, and we will never adequately address the hatred and violence that afflicts our nation today without addressing the sins of our nation collectively. With real healing in mind, real reconciliation. I believe this nation must embrace this conversation if we are to ever exorcise the demons that were seeded in the fabric of this nation from its inception.

If you have not read (or if you've not recently read) Ta-Nehisi Coates' essay *The Case for Reparations*, published in the Atlantic in 2014, I am calling on you to do so in the coming weeks.

It's available online, and I will append the sermon manuscript with the link. You need not agree with everything he says, but read it anyway, and wrestle with it, and then let's talk about it. We will have more formal conversations later this year, but sit with it in the meantime, and see where your heart leads you.

Secondly, learn more about bail reform in this nation. It is an important piece of the work we have to do, and it won't be easy. If your passion lies here, get involved with the Northwest Community Bail Fund, a non-profit begun out of Saint Mark's, and is doing great things in this community. Talk to Jennifer Daugherty to learn more; she serves on its board.ⁱⁱⁱ

Third, and perhaps most importantly, we've got to be about the practice of forgiving in our lives. It's hard work, I know, but as followers of Jesus, it is our seminal work. What I know is that if we will do this work, it will transform our lives. Indeed, it will transform the world.

Charleston, South Carolina, had every reason to be another tinderbox in the long legacy of racial violence, but then the families of those murdered spoke of forgiveness rather than division and hate, and days later more than 10,000 people marched peacefully, black and white together, calling for another way. Riots were averted; more bloodshed was avoided; the Confederate flag was removed from the state capitol grounds shortly thereafter, ending 150 years of that emblem's insistence that peace is power over the other designed to maintain the status quo.

It didn't make everything alright, but good work, important work has begun in earnest in Charleston, South Carolina, of all places. If they can do it, we can too. We must.

I will leave you with this. Last week the pastor of First AME—Seattle's historic black church here on Capitol Hill—Pastor Carey Anderson called me to ask if he and the interfaith community could meet in Bloedel Hall this afternoon at 4pm, specifically to discuss the film *Emanuel*, but more generally to reflect on how we move from contempt and fear to compassion and forgiveness. This is the work we must engage in our own lives as a primer for any real work of reconciliation. Pastor Carey Anderson called Saint Mark's Cathedral because he believes we are siblings who share a common faith that calls us to such work. Do you see the profoundly gracious gesture in that?

Let us pray.

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.^{iv}

ⁱ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/06/19/hate-wont-win-the-powerful-words-delivered-to-dylann-roof-by-victims-relatives/?utm_term=.274263d4c7aa

ⁱⁱ Phrasing adapted from the hymn "Lift Every Voice and Sing" by Rosamund and James Weldon Johnson.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.nwcombailfund.org/>

^{iv} Prayer for the Human Family. 1979 Book of Common Prayer, p. 815