

Proper 8 C June 23, 2019
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Renewed Hope
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

A “For Sale” sign in front of a church building can evoke quite a few emotions. One can hope it means the parish outgrew that building and has moved to a new location. But when the sign signals the closure of the parish, it can be a heartbreaking sight. No matter what caused the church to close, the building itself has been officially and canonically stripped of its identity. Even on the highest diocesan level, no one will call it by its name again. It will only be referred to in the past tense and live in memories and nostalgia; it no longer has a present, let alone a future. And sometimes it is time, for all things come to an end. For churches, sometimes the overwhelming odds of existing just close in around them, the members of the parish have grown tired of fighting for survival, of trying to make a certain type of worship service work, of trying to afford a priest, or an organist, or a Sunday school director, or a sexton, or the utility bills, or the costs of updating an outdated facility. Ask any vestry, sometimes leadership in the church can feel like being overwhelmed by veritable forces that seem out to get you. And sometimes, the fight to stay open just doesn’t seem worth it.

But such a mindset ignores the deep truth we followers of Jesus hold, that of resurrection life. Which makes that “For Sale” sign in front of the church building even more heartbreaking, for it shows no sign of new life in Christ. It is a church stripped bare of its identity and its faith, a lonely and forgotten victim of the times we live in.

That church with the “For Sale” sign has a lot in common with the man Jesus met in today’s Gospel lesson. Did you notice that man was naked, lonely, living among the places of the dead, and no longer seemed to have a name? At least, if he did have a name, no one, not even the author of Luke’s Gospel bothered to use it. Instead he was known for the evil that had beset him, for the veritable and powerful conflicting forces that tormented him. Perhaps he lived isolated and alone among the dead because he was considered to be dead by his family, community and even himself. It’s heartbreaking. And maybe a bit fear-inducing too to meet, even in the Gospel, a man beset with demons.

Many well-meaning scholars and commentators like to tell us that there are no such things as demons, that the people of Jesus’ time were not very intelligent, didn’t know about illnesses and lacked the scientific ability to diagnose things like mental illness. Therefore, we should see the poor man in this Gospel as mentally ill and dismiss the mention of demons. While I believe scholars are well intentioned, I am concerned that equating what today’s Gospel described as demon possession with mental illness can cause harm to those who do suffer with mental illness, especially by causing stigma.

People who suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress, for instance, should not be used as an example to make someone else feel superior to people who lived in the past and do not need suffer further by hearing a preacher equate them with the man in today's Gospel. Nor do people who suffer from other forms of mental illness; they all need to be respected, helped, understood and welcomed. I believe it is not helpful to try and diagnose the man from today's Gospel, because we were not there, and to do so is to dismiss the existence of forces that do cause harm, forces called demonic or evil.

Those words can make some folks uncomfortable, but it is hard to deny the existence of those things which seek to cause harm, where there is no love of any kind, not even love of self. Things like those inner voices that try to convince us we aren't good enough or smart enough or attractive enough or thin enough or wealthy enough or successful enough and can lead us to grab and grasp without care for others. Things like intentionally ruining someone's reputation just to make oneself look better or superior. Taking something not because you want it but because you want to hurt who ever has it. Dehumanizing and abusing someone just because of their gender, race, age, religion, economic status, sexual orientation, or illness. There are unfortunately lots of ways, many even more harmful and destructive than what I just mentioned. These things do exist, and perhaps when we hear or read the word "demon" in today's Gospel we don't have to imagine little devilish looking monsters, but think about the very real things that can and do cause harm and can be a form of oppression for individuals, families, communities and yes, churches and other institutions.

When seen in that light, then today's Gospel story emerges as powerful one about the freedom the resurrection life of Jesus brings to everyone, even those beleaguered by evil. The man who lived among the tombs was oppressed by the demonic or evil powers, like the Israelites had been oppressed by Pharaoh in Egypt and the people of Jesus time felt oppressed by the Roman government. And today's Gospel reminds us God seeks to save people from such oppression. Did you notice how when today's Gospel begins, the first thing the man says may not have been his own words, but those of the demons, asking Jesus to not torment him. If these words were the man's own words, think how terrible his life must have been, that in meeting Jesus, he asks to be treated in a way that won't be a torment. But maybe these aren't the man's words, as we also read before he spoke, Jesus had already commanded the demon to leave him.

Isn't it interesting Jesus then has a conversation not with the man, but the demons who possess him? He asked their name. They begged him not to send them into the abyss but into pigs. Jesus even did as they requested. But that did not keep them safe from Jesus' powers. Scholars have a fascinating explanation for this event. They claim this is sort of like a fantasy for what the oppressed people wanted to do to their oppressors. Legion, the name the demons gave themselves, is the name of a Roman military unit, a large one of about 5-6000 men. The pig or boar was the symbol of one of

the legions of Roman soldiers stationed in Jerusalem. These scholars tell us the people of Jesus' time in the region of the Holy Land wished the Romans would get back on their boats and sail away, and the violence of drowning pigs might indicate the people wished for an even more permanent situation. There is probably some truth behind this interpretation. It might even make it a bit more relatable to anyone who has had to endure an oppressive situation.

There is more to this account in Luke's Gospel that to me is the real surprise. After the pigs' and demons' demise, the people of the nearby community showed up and saw the man who they knew as tormented, now clothed and sitting at Jesus' feet. In other words, in the position of an obedient servant. The man no longer is tormented by evil, he has been liberated, saved, healed, and in response to the freedom he's been given, he chose to believe in, learn from, and follow Jesus. You'd think the people in the crowd would be amazed, excited, and filled with hope at the sight. But that's not what the author of Luke described. Instead, the power of Jesus to liberate the man from what tormented him produced fear in the people of the land.

One scholar explained their fear as the result of Jesus destroying their local economy. With all those dead pigs, they were now at a loss, unable to make the money that was the base of their economy. They feared for their own demise now that they couldn't do things the way they had always done them.

Or maybe it frightened them to see the man they had known as possessed by evil to be transformed into someone different. This is a foretaste of resurrection life before Jesus' actual resurrection. One of the mistakes people often make about healing is that they assume healing means going back to what was considered "normal". But there is no going backward. My brother's broken leg has healed, but he's now learning he can't do things quite the same way he used to, it's healed and it's different than it was before. Likewise, the man Jesus liberated was most likely different than he was before he was possessed.

That's the thing about resurrection life we can get wrong too. Resurrection doesn't mean going back to the way things used to be. It means new life, new life in Christ. Remember, even those who were close followers of Jesus didn't recognize him right away after he rose from the tomb. It was Jesus. He had risen. And He was different, He was new. Resurrection life doesn't ignore or dismiss the old, remember the risen Jesus also still bore the marks of the crucifixion, as evidence that God brings new life, even from the worst suffering and death.

That might be what the people were afraid of. And sometimes followers of Jesus can be afraid of that new life too. New means not having the reassurance of things happening the way they always have in the past, and that can be frightening.

The people in today's Gospel were so frightened, they asked Jesus to leave. And he did. It's amazing to me that as powerful as Luke's Gospel for today shows Jesus to be, he didn't use that power to force his way on anyone. Actually, Jesus was pretty agreeable and amenable; even when we has rejected and asked to leave. But unlike how that community had abandoned the man Jesus healed, Jesus did not abandon them.

It's understandable that the liberated man would want to go with Jesus when he got back into his boat to leave. But here is where Jesus surprises us again by not being amenable. He didn't let the man go with him. Instead, Jesus gave him a purpose to stay and proclaim what God had done for him. This man can no longer be compared to the abandoned church with the "For Sale" sign. He has changed, he embodies the new life of resurrection. Jesus left a little resurrection life behind in the man restored and renewed to tell the people who were so afraid of the goodness of what God can do. In other words, Jesus left him to be the church in that place.

We don't know what happened to the man, or the people of the region. But I can tell you about an Episcopal Church in Philadelphia that chose to close its doors a few years ago. But a new bishop re-opened that church last year, not to try and be the type of parish it had been, but to re-imagine how it can be an Episcopal presence to its community. The church is now open only during the week, because that is when people are around, and its doors are wide open to its community. People can come in and get coffee and a snack. Charge their phones. Get warm in winter and get out of the heat in the summer. Talk to a clergy person if they want to. The homeless sleep in safety on the old pews. Every day at noon there is a church service. There is access to their historical crypt that visitors to the city are especially interested to see. That's it. There are no programs dependent on volunteers. No elaborate liturgies. But there is a presence that is Christ centered. It is renewed. And different. It was given back its name of St. Stephens Episcopal Church. No one knows how it will evolve, but they are trying to embrace resurrection life, and that means there is hope, for the church and for the world.