

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost – Christina Smerick

Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

This story is filled with homiletic possibilities. The Gerasenes are Gentiles—the people across the water, the Others; their main economy was in pig herds; one could see the healed demoniac as the first missionary to the Gentiles even. But what kept popping up in my mind as I read and re-read this story in my favorite Gospel was this: Who is our demoniac?

That’s the question that haunts me this week. Because I think we need to read ourselves into the Gerasenes here, a bit—to see what their reaction to Jesus’ miracle tells us about ourselves.

It states clearly that they fear Jesus. Why? He threatens the order of their complacency and deprives them of the comfort of their demoniac—their scapegoat. They don’t ask for healing for this man; they chain him, he escapes, they keep him close but not too close, he *tortures* himself, naked and without shelter (Mark says he stoned *himself*), and we don’t know what they’ve tried or not tried, but they seem...comfortable with the status quo. And his role here echoes too much for me the role of the scapegoat, the sacrificial victim, the tortured one on the outskirts, marked by our iniquities.

So perhaps they want the demoniac, the scapegoat, to remain in the shadows of the cemetery “as a depository for their violence, for their demons.”\* If they’re in him, after all, then they’re not in us. The fact that they had tried to chain him shows how much they needed him. Jesus poses a threat to the status quo, so they ask him to leave. And Jesus does go away—but he leaves them with the healed man—a “constant reminder of an alternative.”\*

Who is our demoniac? Who is our scapegoat? Who do we put our sins on?—and yes, friends, we do this, we put OUR sins upon others.

In this week of yet another horror, this week of perhaps the most American horror story yet, we must confess, as one, that we Christians are the Gerasenes.

This is a uniquely American horror story because it brings all of our problems to a head—it elides easy answers. A young American man, the son of immigrants (as some of us are), a young American man who felt both attracted to and repelled by gay men, legally purchased an assault rifle and slaughtered 49 people. But they weren’t just any people—not schoolchildren this time (can you believe I can even utter that sentence?)—but gay people. Mostly gay men—young gay men, mostly Latino. Some also the son of immigrants, some undocumented. And our young American was a Muslim young American. In one horrible, awful, inconceivable (except here in the home of the free and the brave) event, we have immigration, Islam, guns, and gay people. Our prejudices and hatreds and other-ing of the other—they are legion.

So who is our demoniac? Who is the scapegoat we keep close but not too close, who is the person we both lure in with love and yet chain, the person we don’t dare reject but also don’t dare to embrace? The Muslim? The Immigrant? The gay person?

Oh yes, our scapegoat is Legion.

Or rather, no. Our *scapegoat* isn’t Legion—our sins, our demons which we put upon others, upon our scapegoat, are Legion. The scapegoat is supposed to bear the sins of the community, remember, to be the sacrifice. And yes, we use that language to describe

Jesus, but in practice?—in practice we don't rely upon JESUS to bear our sins. Not when we have gay people who have supposedly polluted our culture with sex; not when we have Muslims who have supposedly invented violence in what was a peaceful nation; not when we have immigrants who have supposedly invented economic hardship. Jesus? Who's he? He's the guy we get to feel good about. We have plenty of scapegoats, and we have reverted (or have always been) a sacrificial culture that differs from ancient times only in its *dishonesty* about what we are doing. At least when the Aztecs sacrificed a virgin, it was done publicly and without apology or expressions of 'love'.

The demoniac is the scapegoat of the Gerasene community. "His life is essentially out of his control... The influences upon him were many (Legion)."\* And those Gerasenes feared the power of God more than Legion. Yes. They kept that poor man filled with their demons close, and they sent Jesus away. Think upon that.

So to repeat, because it bears repeating, the demoniac served a purpose in their community—they kept him close but not too close. He held their demons and probably was a good tourist attraction. After all, how else do you explain their reaction to his healing? Are they happy? Thrilled that this man was returned to himself, allowed to be himself again? No. First of all, Jesus ruined their business when the swine fell off the cliff. So there was a big economic change, a disaster even, as the demons were removed from their neighbor. And now their neighbor, their reliable possessed guy, the one who existed, it seemed, to remind them how good they had it, how healthy THEY were, was healed and was told to STAY with them, telling them what God had done. *THEY DIDN'T WANT TO HEAR IT.* And neither do we, do we? Not unless the healing looks like what we WANT it to. Sure, Jesus, remove our sins from that scapegoat—but don't make us pay a price for it. Please keep everything the same, keep the system that benefits us the same. And if that's not possible, maybe we're OK with the demoniac, thanks very much. Pair this with Galatians if you will.

The question plaguing this section, really, and a lot of Paul's writings is this: *How much like a Jew does a Gentile need to be, to be a Christian?*

*Gee, I wonder what else we could substitute there.*

We know the answer, we Gentiles, because WE BENEFITTED FROM THE CHANGE back then. We are no longer the Gentiles in this story, folks. We are the devout Jews, expecting people to conform to our ways in order to be part of our community. We must have standards, after all. We must have expectations. There are RULES.

This is COUNTRY CLUB Language, not the language of the church.

The language of the Church is not: conform to our rules and we'll let you in; be like us; behave like us; be hetero-normative, please; fit in, please. The instant that becomes our language we are no longer the Church. We are some exclusive club. We are only the Church when we affirm, over and over again, that in Christ Jesus there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave or free, nor male and female. And we confess it when we live like that is true. And we have *failed to live that out, over and over again. And then we wring our hands at another tragedy. We failed, folks. We didn't pull the trigger, but we have contributed, over the course of decades, to the hate and homophobia that makes this tragedy thinkable, actionable, possible.*

Honestly, at least twenty years ago gay people knew better than to darken the door of a church. If they went to church, they stayed closeted. Twenty years ago we were clear on

our homophobia and gay people knew it. Nowadays, these poor kids, kids who didn't live through Stonewall (look it up if you don't know, and shame on you, really, for not knowing), didn't live through the AIDS crisis and our deafening silence and fear, are lured, yes, lured into the church only to be told: oh you can attend, but you can't be a MEMBER. You can show up, and we LOVE you, but you can't be ordained. We've lured them in, encouraged them to be vulnerable, only to slip the knife in once they think they're safe. At best we've made some gestures of vague good will; we've learned some lingo. But we have, fundamentally, failed to *act*.

You know what's breaking my heart the most about Orlando?—the out-ing. Some of the victims, dead and alive, were not out to their conservative Christian families. Mothers and fathers found out their dead son was gay when they identified his body. Some people who were there that night, who watched their friends get gunned down, can't talk to their own families about it because they would have to admit they were THERE. They have to mourn the loss of dear loved ones alone, and hide their grief. Think about that. Think about not only grieving, but not being able to tell people you're grieving. We simply must recognize and confess that it is CHURCH TEACHING that leads people to mourn alone in silence and in FEAR. Yes, it is. Shame on us. Shame.

In Galatians, it comes down to this: if We KNOW that the law doesn't save us, that *our own actions DO NOT SAVE us*, that our cis-gender hetero-normativity does NOT save us, if none of us stand on our own but rely on divine action for salvation, *then the distinctions between the obedient and disobedient break down, the line between the accepted and rejected dissolves*.

*One does not become a Christian and then join the church. One joins the church and becomes Christian.* And what are we doing? Do we 'let' queer people JOIN the church as equals, or do we speak platitudes and gently close the door to the inner sanctum? It sure seems like we have a separate but equal clause.

The Gerasenes had their scapegoat. The Jews had the Gentiles. Who do we have, and why do we think we're not the villains in these stories?

I'm fed up, folks. I'm fed up.

As we moan and wring our hands about the 'state of the world' and the horror in it, let me ask you this: what has been in existence for the past 2000 years? What has survived the rise and fall of empires, of technologies, of plagues and earthquakes and devastation? The Church.

And yet we act as if we had nothing to do with the state of the world, no responsibility for the situation. It's always someone else's fault: secular culture (produced via the Protestant Reformation), those Muslims, black people, WHITE people, socio-economic inequalities. Maybe we just lack faith...faith that the same spirit that was in Christ Jesus is with us now, casting out fear, but not casting out responsibility.

We have been in existence and indeed in dominance for 2000 bleeping years. And yet we have the nerve to act like helpless victims. But in many, many ways, we have *created* the victims and it is high time we stop pointing out splinters and instead confess the plank.

I'm fed up.

So here's what I want. I want everyone to hush up about their precious opinions about sexuality, unless you are a sexual or gender minority. Honestly, right now, even if we have something nice to say, something affirming, something loving, just for the love of

God, the Church, but most of all our grieving, scared-to-death friends and relatives and neighbors, we need to shut up and listen.

I would like the church universal to stop praying for the victims in Orlando and start confessing how they CONTRIBUTED to their slaughter.

Hear this from a GC alum:

“Why does it take a bone chilling act of mass-scale violence for the church to acknowledge the suffering of the queer community? Where was the church when Leelah Alcorn committed suicide? Where was the church when 21 transgender children of God were murdered in 2015? How is the church caring for the 80,000 homeless queer children in the US? Why has it been for so long part of the cause of these tragedies rather than part of the solution? And why has it collectively decided that now, while it's trending and there are all sorts of brightly colored new profile filters, that now, it gets to be praised for #prayingfororlando?

“If you're non-affirming and still wanna support the queer community through this tragedy, great, cool. But don't you dare try to without at least acknowledging that the views you hold played a part in what happened in Orlando and what happens to queer people every day. (I'm looking at you, Chick-Fil-A, and Greenville College, my love.) It contributes to a cultural mindset of fear and other-ing. I'm sorry (read: I'm not sorry), but no matter how much you “love the sinner,” your interpretation of Scripture has contributed to this tragedy. Own up to it already. Keep your beliefs if you want, but stop trying to pretend that they aren't toxic and quite literally life-threatening for queer people.”

We stand on the shores of a lake, at the edge of a cliff. With us stands our scapegoat demoniac. *And* with us is Jesus. And Jesus sees what we can't. He sees the demoniac for who he IS, not who the community makes him to be. Jesus sees us, too—for who we are, not who we make ourselves out to be. Jesus offers the Church the chance to be truly free—to belong to a body that is neither circumcised nor uncircumcised, neither marked with shackles nor free of such scars, a body that is neither male nor female, a body that lives only when the Spirit of God is upon it and within it. We have sinned, my friends, profoundly and consistently and viciously, for years, and we have cast those sins upon others' bodies and souls at tremendous cost. Please, please join with me in confession and repentance. Please let the church be what she should be: a safe haven for all those who labor and are burdened, a place of hope for the hopeless. Please, let us confess and repent before another drop of blood is shed.

\*Many thanks to Richard Shaffer, Elaine Heath, Mark Douglas and Robert Hamerton-Kelly