



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“We Are Called: To Transformation”

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

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May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Last week and this week I have been wearing my rainbow stole, and this week I want to begin my reflections by lighting a special candle to bring to mind the young people gunned down in Orlando a week ago, young people congregating in a place they thought was safe to be who they are and turned out to be a target of hate. I light this candle for each of those killed or injured last week. I light it for every person in the LGBTQ communities who are struggling to figure out who they are in their body, mind, heart and soul, and who long for a safe place to talk about that.

All this past week I have been listening to the commentators, analysts and speculators puzzling over the question of what would possess a person to do what this 29 year old from Orlando did last Sunday morning. It is a really complex situation, ripe for people to spin in whatever direction serves their purposes. The shooter's family originated from Afghanistan. He named allegiance to radical organizations. Was it a terror attack? It was an attack on a Gay night club. Was it a hate crime? Or was he an unstable person who snapped? What would possess someone to do this?

From this distance it is really hard to tell and everything we hear will be filtered by the media, so it is very hard to get to the bottom of the question. What we know is that he was born and raised in the US, that he was very confused politically, (he claimed allegiance to Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, and ISIS all of which are enemies of each other), that he had scoped the Pulse Nightclub out in the past, so the location appears deliberate, and that he had easy access to the kind of weaponry that makes the scale of this attack possible.

It will be tempting to look only at the guy and locate what possessed him within himself- personal abnormalities that caused him to act this way: mental illness, family background or upbringing- all the things that he shares only with a very small circle of people. The political overlay which labels him an Afghan radical does that. The religious overlay which locates him as a Muslim radical does the same. The theory which suggests he possessed repressed self-hate based on sexual orientation does that. The question of mental instability or alcohol problems does that. Even the way we in Canada look at this situation and point to the differences around guns in our society makes this an American issue, not having to do with us. Simple answers to this very complex problem will only serve to give false assurances that we are ok in our circle and he is not in it. But what possessed this man cannot be isolated and pushed away so simply.

You could say the same for the man who lived among the Geresenes, across the Sea of Galilee from Jesus' stomping grounds. This is one of my favorite gospel stories because it speaks on a couple of levels at the same time. It plays with complexity. The man is possessed and the power of his possession is very hard to contain. Whenever they try to contain it, he breaks the bonds. When we meet him he is naked, wild, loud, and addresses Jesus directly. The community has done everything it can to isolate him, draw a circle around him, but he keeps coming back. Finally Jesus calls the demons out and casts them into swine which run headlong into the sea.

The story itself points us to complexity. There is the political overly- the demon is named Legion, a hardly veiled reference to Roman occupation. Was that what possessed this guy? There is the religious overlay- the demon was cast into swine, a hardly veiled reference to unclean

animals. Was this a religious possession? There are many references to the wildness of his behavior which they tried to contain. But afterwards, he is sitting up and in his right mind talking to Jesus. That doesn't just happen with mental instability.

I believe that his wellbeing and ours exists at both the individual and collective levels at the same time and that those two are intimately connected. There is always a me and an us in what disturbs our souls and possesses us. Individuals experience poverty and they come by the church all the time and we try to help them out. At the same time, our competitive economic system requires that there be not enough for somebody. So in a sense, we, collectively, create poverty. All the social ills that we experience today have both an individual and a communal element to them. Religious extremism, political extremism, racism, sexism. They all come to bear upon us as individuals but are also communally based. In a country where still 1 in 5 LGBTQ people are victims of hate crimes and there are more than a 100 anti-LGBTQ bills (from anti-gay marriage to bathroom bills) pending in dozens of states, are we surprised that this man in Orlando was possessed to target a gay nightclub? Homophobia victimizes certain individuals, but is a collective form of possession. In Canada, it was important to hear the individual stories of residential schools during the truth and reconciliation commission, and it is important that we recognize that we are possessed by a history of racist policy which created those stories.

Which brings me to the end of our gospel reading, the part where the conversation is taking place between Jesus and the formerly possessed guy.

"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. 36Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. 37Then 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. 38The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, 39"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."

The people are as afraid of what heals this man than they are of what possessed him. They want not only the illness to go away, they want the cure to go away because the cure would ask something of them. They want to call the whole thing a weird anomaly that has nothing to do with them. But Jesus says no. You are a product of the community, of your culture. What possessed you is not just individual, it is communal. You are called to not simply be healed as an individual, but you are called to heal collectively. You are well, but all the relationships that broke in the process need healing. All the isolation that developed over time needs mending. You need to go back and re-enter community, heal relationships, help the community get over whatever it was that possessed it collectively- what made it possible for you to become so isolated and so hurt. Otherwise the culture will create another possessed person.

We can locate what possessed the Orlando shooter to do what he did within himself, chock it up to whatever possessed his individual or family psyche. Or we can see him as a product of toxins within the culture which possess us all. When, in the calm after the media storm, we are sitting up, clothed and in our right minds, that is when America can ask how to address the communal possession of gun culture. That is when we can look at each other and ask how might we address the communal possessions of religious fundamentalism, political fundamentalism, of homophobia that possess our culture. The gospel calls us to personal transformation of the individual soul and it also calls us to the collective transformation of the soul of the world. It calls us to create a communal culture possessed by love that stands as an alternative vision to the cultures of hate that possess the collective psyche.

Paul put it well when he said, now, and for the community of Christ, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female. Now there is no gay or straight, Muslim or

Christian. Now the binary worlds of sexual orientation and gender fall away. Now the fundamentalisms of religion or race or creed fall away. Now we don our rainbow stoles and light our candles not just for individuals but for a transformed world free of such obsessions and possessions. Now, for the love of God, collectively, we must sit up, clothed and in our right minds, and be free. Amen