

Return Home  
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz  
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“Return Home” Pilgrim Church UCC, June 19, 2016—Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Luke 8:26-39)

Change is hard. We all know that—but when change stares us in the face and we need to respond, more often than not we’d prefer to keep things as is. One of the places I am most looking forward to visiting in Jerusalem is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (a church that does not do change well.) In fact, they take the cringe-worthy phrase: “but we’ve always done it this way” to a whole new level! This church is venerated as the site of the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus and it’s probably the most sacred pilgrimage site for Christians in the Holy Land, if not the most sacred pilgrimage site for Christians period. People come from all over the world to gather in this holy space and witness the transformative power of God’s love.

Now this has been a difficult week in the wake of the shooting at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando. It was mostly young, gay, Latino men who died while dancing on a Saturday night. It’s also been a week where we’ve witnessed the power of community, of people coming together to mourn and to honor those lives lost. It’s been a week where demands for action on gun control have come from those vigils across the county and from the floor of the United States Senate to ensure that these massacres stop happening in our country. One life lost to gun violence is too many. Enough is enough. It’s been a little over a year since nine African American churchgoers were gunned down at Mother Emmanuel in Charleston as they sat down to study the Bible together and not that long since Newtown and we could go on and on with all the gun violence we have witnessed of late.

After our vigil concluded, I spoke with some folks who were just thankful to have the space to come together as a community on the Green. Rabbi Jaffe estimated that we had around 250 people in attendance on super short notice—what a testimony to Lexington and the outpouring of love. And in my conversation with some folks from Temple Isaiah, we spoke about what brings us together and we ended up speaking about Israel. A woman recounted a beautiful religious experience she had at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and that she felt what a powerful, moving religious site this is for Christians given her experience there as a devout Jew. It was such a tender conversation where we could speak about what unites us as people of faith—love! So these wonderful Jewish women blessed me on my way even as we gathered to acknowledge our pain, our loss, and our anger after another mass shooting.

What’s hard is that even though the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (for instance) is this powerful, moving religious site that Christians and people of other faiths recognize as such it’s also known as the location of an epic battle over territory within the sacred space itself. It’s like you see the best and the worst of religion within its walls. Denominations even battle over a ladder. Under a mandate from 1852 the care of the church is shared by six Christian denominations—the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Roman Catholic, Coptic, Ethiopian, and Syriac Orthodox churches. The church is carefully divided into sections. Some sections are held in common and others strictly belong to one of those denominations. There’s a set of complicated rules that even mandate how the groups from those denominations can travel through each section of the church on given days. Some of the sections of the church are hotly disputed—arguments and even fistfights erupt over territory within the sanctuary.

One area that’s been a place of controversy is a small section of the roof that’s disputed between the Copts and the Ethiopians. A Coptic monk at any given time sits on the roof in a chair placed in a specific spot to express their denomination’s claim. In the summer of 2002

(on a really hot day), the monk sitting in that chair moved his chair eight inches to find some shade. This chair move was interpreted as a violation of boundaries resulting in eleven people hospitalized after a fight broke out. Which brings me back to the immovable ladder. It's become a centuries-old symbol of the extreme territories within the church itself. During the 1800s, a man belonging to one of the denominations placed a ladder on a ledge against an exterior second-floor wall. No one has dared to move the ladder ever since fearing that it will incite violence. So this random ladder has remained hanging in that spot as proof that change can be hard and people can be territorial, to say the very least.[1]

It's sad that this church is the traditional site of important events in the life of Jesus and powerful religious experiences to this day . . . and denominational arguments that have lasted for well over one hundred years. But as we can see in our Gospel story, divisions are hard to overcome. Change is hard to take. Fear can make us not think straight. Today we can easily pass off this story of the Gerasene Demoniac as crazy because it's about an exorcism. A whole legion of demons come out of this man, enter a herd of pigs, and then rush down a bank to drown themselves in a lake. It's certainly not my favorite story about Jesus, but there's some interesting stuff here.

Let's not pass this off as an exorcism, roll our eyes, and think this is irrelevant. Because the thing about demons is that demons don't care if we believe they actually exist or not. The great preacher Fred Craddock once said, "Not believing in demons has hardly eradicated evil in our world." [2] It doesn't mean that we don't have things in our lives that hold us back from God. It doesn't mean that we don't have things that make us feel less than or overwhelmed or like we are weighed down by something that's destroying us inside. We may not call it demonic and we should always refrain from calling people "demons." But that doesn't make Bible stories about exorcisms irrelevant.

Not believing in demons doesn't mean there's no evil or suffering in our lives or world. On a week such as this, we must pay attention to those who suffer. Our Christian faith compels us to reach out in love. This is why the President of the United Church of Christ, Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer, was on the ground in Orlando this week to offer comfort and support to the GLBTQ community in a way that other expressions of Christianity won't. In fact, some Christians continue to condemn GLBTQ people as living immoral lives or being abominations. The Westboro Baptist Church (which is a hate group, let's be honest) has vowed to picket the funerals of these mostly young gay Latino men. We must offer a different vision of Christianity in the United Church of Christ. We must shine our lights! So however we understand exorcisms or demons we can't hide from evil or suffering, we can't deny that people are hurting in the wake of a truly evil action targeting a minority community. We can always show forth love. And proclaim that love is love.

Stories about Jesus exorcising demons are really about healing and transformation at the end of the day. About helping people who suffer to experience wholeness by meeting people where they are and just loving them. At the end of the story, the man who had been on the outskirts of his community—living in the tombs, naked, sometimes under guard and bound with chains and shackles—is healed and Jesus tells him to return home. "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." [3]

As soon as Jesus stepped into the country of the Gerasenes the man with the demons was right there in front of him. Jesus stepped out of the boat opposite Galilee. Jesus wasn't on his home turf anymore and encounters someone in deep spiritual pain. And Jesus doesn't leave him where he found him—he helps him out.

It's like a story once told on The West Wing (one of my favorite TV shows ever):

"This guy's walking down the street when he falls in a hole. The walls are so steep he can't get out. A doctor passes by and the guy shouts up, 'Hey you. Can you help me out?' The doctor writes a prescription, throws it down in the hole and moves on. Then a priest comes along and the guy shouts up, 'Father, I'm down in this hole can you help me out?' The priest writes out a prayer, throws it down in the hole and moves on. Then a friend walks by, 'Hey, Joe, it's me can you help me out?' And the friend jumps in the hole. Our guy says, 'Are you stupid? Now we're both down here.' The friend says, 'Yeah, but I've been down here before and I know the way out.'"[4]

Jesus was no stranger to adversity. Jesus was no stranger to suffering. So he acts like a friend to the man with the demons. Jesus goes down into the hole and he helps him find the way out. The reaction of the people of the surrounding country to this healing is fascinating and sad in our story. The people see the man healed and ask Jesus to leave them alone because they were seized with great fear! Jesus gets back in his boat and returns from whence he came, knowing that the man would be able to return home and be restored to his community. But he freaked everybody out by climbing down into that hole to help this man be restored to God, to himself, and to his community.

When we encounter the healing power of God—a God who desires us to live lives of wholeness and love—perhaps that can be a little scary at first. Because maybe it means that our lives have changed somehow or our lives will change somehow. Maybe it means that as Christians we can't throw a prescription or a prayer down that hole to someone who's suffering. Instead we've got to jump down there to help lead people home, with the help of God. We can be friends of God and one another especially in these difficult days. May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] "The Immovable Ladder at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre," Slate, [http://www.slate.com/blogs/atlas\\_obscura/2013/06/03/the\\_immovable\\_ladder...](http://www.slate.com/blogs/atlas_obscura/2013/06/03/the_immovable_ladder...)

[2] Fred Craddock as quoted by Kathryn Matthew Huey, UCC Sermon Seeds for February 1, 2015 (Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Year B) [http://www.ucc.org/worship\\_samuel\\_february\\_1\\_2015](http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_february_1_2015)

[3] Luke 8:39.

[4] A Leo story from The West Wing, <http://westwing.bewarne.com/queries/story.html>