

Sermon on Luke 8:26-39, Galatians 3:23-29
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, June 20, 2010
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ....sisters in brothers in Christ....hmmm. What difference would it make if I greeted you in a different way? Good morning, Lutherans....my fellow Redeemerites....my fellow Americans...any of these greetings seems to separate us into some group, which is something we human beings always seem to do. If I greet you as Lutherans, that means that I don't expect you to be Baptists, Roman Catholics, or Unitarians – though some of you may, in fact, be Christians from another denomination. If I greet you as Redeemerites, that assumes you are members of this congregation, or consider yourself “one of us”. If I call you “Americans”, that probably assumes citizenship status, but you and I know how many possible ethnic, cultural, gender, religious and interest groups that could be! So I greeted you in the name of Jesus, as friends of Christ, or brothers and sisters in Christ, which assumes that all of you are baptized, or soon-to-be baptized, or at least “friends” of Christ together, which is a much more universal greeting, appropriate for Sunday morning. But this greeting does separate us from whole lot of people throughout the world, who are not baptized or consider themselves “friends in Christ”.

These days, thanks to the technology of social media and computer networking, you can be friends with anyone you wish, across the world and across political, social, or cultural boundaries, as long as you can reach them over the internet. You can ask anyone in the world to be your “Facebook friend” if you have their email address, and if they accept your request. So there are now millions of people “on Facebook” these days, each having anything from a few dozen to thousands of “friends” – that is, internet connections. (Could this be anything like us, in the Church, being connected to a billion other Christians through baptism, yet each of us having anywhere from a few to a few thousand Christian relationships, depending on the size of our congregation?) Anyway, once people get on to Facebook, the universal social network page, they immediately separate themselves into social “groups”, according to their high school, college, or interest, to find other people “like them”, searching for those who share their interests or their past. It's really interesting how this works!

Our scriptures today have a lot to say about our human divisions into separate groups, and what God intends to do about that through Jesus. The ancient world was just like our present world, except without our present technology. In the ancient world humans were divided by clan or tribe (later city-states or empires), by religion, language, gender, and whether you were “free” or a servant

or slave to another. In the first lesson from the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah spoke to the people of Israel living in exile, surrounded by many peoples who were not “like them”. Isaiah wrote about “God’s impatience” with the many people who did not call on Israel’s God “Yahweh”, who went their own ways, following other gods, sacrificing incense and animals to them. Isaiah’s vision was of God’s promise to bring the people of Israel back from exile to the land that God had promised them. Descendants of Jacob and from Judah would return to inherit the land. And one day, peoples from all nations would come to God’s holy mountain.

In the time of Jesus, Palestine was a place of many different types of people, divided by language, beliefs, and customs. Jesus was a Jew, in a predominantly Jewish area, surrounded by peoples with many other beliefs. In Galilee where Jesus was from, you were either a Jew or a “foreigner” (or “Gentile”), and you seldom crossed the border except to do business. Next you were male or female, an adult or a child, and a free person or a slave or servant. Your lot in life was mainly decided upon which of these you were. If you were a free Jewish adult male, you were likely better off than someone who was a slave, or a woman, and a Gentile. There was even a prayer that men might offer, thanking God for not making them a woman, a slave, or a Gentile. That’s just how it was. Everyone accepted this, and few ever challenged the way things were.

Then Jesus came along. He had a conversation with a Samaritan woman at a public well. He healed people who were not Jews but were sick, and praised them for their faith. In today’s lesson he went to a country across the Sea of Galilee, of the Gerasenes, a place where the people were not Jews. As soon as Jesus’ boat landed, he met a man who was demon-possessed, naked and living in the tombs outside his city. (His relatives had tried for years to feed and protect him by keeping him shackled and under guard, but he always broke his chains and escaped to this place.) Jesus commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. But there was not just one spirit, there were thousands – their name was *Legion* – who begged Jesus not to order them back into the abyss, but into a large herd of pigs instead. So Jesus allowed them to go into the pigs, who immediately ran down the hillside into the lake, and drowned. The demon-possessed man was healed. People who came to see what had happened found the man fully-clothed, in his right mind, sitting at Jesus’ feet like a disciple. The people were very much afraid – they had never seen anything like this, and asked Jesus to leave immediately. The man asked Jesus if he could follow him, but Jesus told him to stay with his own people and tell them what God had done for him. And so he did. But it would have taken much courage, to stay in a place where for years you had been considered “mad”, whose cure had cost many their livelihood.

This strange miracle story has so many levels of meaning. But essentially we see how Jesus crossed a boundary, going to a place of foreigners, or “Gentiles”,

to bring his power of healing and salvation. With this exorcism, he had set a man free from a lifetime of torment and separation from community, and turned him into a witness to God's power in Jesus. This power was not limited to Jews, but was for the benefit of all people. Still, those who witnessed this power didn't understand it, and were so afraid that they asked Jesus to go away.

The Apostle Paul picks up on this theme of the universality of God's power in Christ, when he wrote in his letter to the Galatians that *"in Christ you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."*

How many times have we forgotten this truth, that we are ALL one in Christ, and held to our many divisions, as if we are ruled by their reality instead of by our baptism? How many times have we said "we are Lutherans", instead of "we are Christians – brothers and sisters in Christ – and all children of God?" Within Lutheranism, there are some of us who are ELCA, some are Missouri Synod, and some from Wisconsin – how crazy is that? How often have we said we are "Americans" first, and Christians second? How often do we call ourselves citizens, and demean immigrants and strangers by calling them "aliens" or "illegals"? Some of us are men and some of us are women, some are children and some are adults, some are young and some are old, and some are in-between, some are gay and some are straight, some are rich and some are poor, some are black and some are white, but can't we first just be "one in Christ"?

When Jesus left Galilee, it was a test of the boundaries that divided his people from their neighbors. He crossed a border and healed somebody. The reaction of the healed man's neighbors was fear – they asked Jesus to leave. Today, Jesus continues to lead us by crossing our own borders and divisions, by calling all of us friends, brothers and sisters, children of God. Jesus continues to challenge us to cross boundaries in his name, as witnesses to the gospel. God knows that there are many borders for us to cross. Democrats and Republicans can't even talk to each other anymore without name-calling, so can we in the Church cross political boundaries, sit down at tables together, and solve some of our many problems in this community? Lutherans can't go to Churchwide Assemblies without being divided over our views of scripture or human sexuality, but can we talk to each other now as brothers and sisters and find new ways to be witnesses to God's love in Jesus Christ? True, we can all gather in our great stone churches and worship God in our own ways without fear. But do we dare to go outside these walls and bring a word of good news from God in the person of Jesus Christ to our neighbors across the street or down the block?

Scripture says that perfect faith casts out all fear. True, our faith is far from perfect, and you and I may be afraid to do many things. But in our baptism God has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit, which gives you and me the power of faith to overcome our fears. Jesus has gone before us as an example of what is possible when we go beyond the boundaries of our present fears, and bring the good news of God's love and power. Human beings find healing when people of faith dare to cross those many lines of division. And in the end, we often find that what we are afraid of wasn't so bad after all: when the people we once feared become our friends, or even brothers and sisters in Christ! Jesus invites you and me to join him in facing those fears, crossing those boundaries, so that one day the promise will be a true reality in our lives: *that we shall no longer be divided, that we shall all be one in Christ Jesus!*