

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost  
June 19, 2016  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, St. Paul  
Eric Fought, Pastoral Intern

Luke 8:26-39

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Good morning.

I'd like to begin this morning with a note of thanks to all of you for the welcome you have extended to me over the past few weeks. I'm delighted to be with you this summer as a pastoral intern, and have been enjoying getting to know many of you. I look forward to that process continuing.

You should know that I have a deep and enduring respect for this congregation and your pastor. Over the past several years, I've worked alongside many of you in the shared fight for economic, racial and social justice in our state.

A couple of quick note about me that might be of interest, especially to those of you who I haven't had a chance to meet as of yet.

I'm in the process of completing a Master of Divinity degree at Saint John's School of Theology in Collegeville. This pastoral internship is the final requirement following three years of study. I recently moved back to Minneapolis from the St. Cloud area, where I lived on campus throughout my studies. It's good to be back home in the Twin Cities.

In late August I plan to begin work on a Doctor of Ministry degree at Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis, on the campus of St. Louis University. My studies there will be focused on preaching and homiletics, where I will be preparing to teach in the field and become a better preacher myself, connecting the work of social justice to Scripture and vice versa.

Thanks again for the warm welcome. It is really good to be with you.

It has been a challenging week. As we gathered for worship together last Sunday, details were emerging regarding the massacre in Orlando. Like many of you, I spent the remainder of the day watching as news reports confirmed those details: 50 people dead, including the gunman, more than 50 injured, in the deadliest mass shooting by a civilian in modern American history.

It's clear now that the gunman intentionally targeted the LGBTQ community, his act of unspeakable hate and terror taking place in the Pulse nightclub, a popular venue. It was

Latin night, and most of those killed and injured were from the intersections of the Latino and LGBTQ communities.

They came to dance, to spend time with friends, to be themselves.

For those of us in the LGBTQ community, our bars and nightclubs are not simply places to unwind and have fun. They are sanctuaries—sacred spaces where we can be ourselves, be affirmed and connect with each other in the midst of ongoing struggles that are at the same time personal trials and shared experiences.

Throughout recent history, before the Internet and smartphones, before Ellen came out, before Minnesota and the Supreme Court made history, bars and clubs provided a place for solace and sanctuary. And they still do, particularly during this month set aside to celebrate Pride.

They came to dance. They came to be the beautiful, authentic children of a God who loves them without condition.

Hate and terror entered that sanctuary last weekend. Today, in this sanctuary and in sanctuaries throughout the world, we as people of faith are called to respond. And while this congregation has a longstanding history of being open and affirming, with our table open to all, that is not what many of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters experience from the Christian world. The deafening silence from many corners of the church confirmed this reality this week.

It wasn't supposed to happen. Pulse, the nightclub was supposed to be a safe space. But so are our schools, our parking lots and our movie theaters, our temples, our mosques and our churches.

This week we also mark the one-year anniversary of the shooting in Charleston, where nine of our brothers and sisters in Christ were brutally murdered on a hot Wednesday evening. They had come to open the Word of God in bible study and a gunman opened fire.

I don't know about you, but I've had enough. And I've had enough of having enough.

Each day this week has been filled with an intense cycle of emotions—from rage and disbelief to deep sadness and grief to cynicism and resignation to, gratefully, a sense of hope and determination.

I've wept, and have feared for my own safety and the safety of those I love. But the fear that has been the most pronounced, the fear that keeps coming back, is the fear that we as a society are too broken to fix any of it. I'm truly afraid that we are too divided, that our most dangerous demons of polarization, division and brokenness have a hold on us that we can't release.

In our Gospel reading this morning, we find Jesus arriving by boat in a land away from his home. The story in Luke's account follows the calming of the sea, an exorcism itself, removing evil forces from the water. Upon arriving on land, Jesus is met by a man who is deeply troubled, and a community of people that have set this man apart, chaining him up and leaving him in the tombs far from the comfort of their lives. The man is naked, being without the decency of clothing for some time.

It is unclear the nature of the demons that possess him, although we know this is a story that is found in both Mark and Matthew as well, which points to the significance of the encounter. Further, it's the one story in Luke of Jesus ministering outside of Jewish territory.

Jesus, as he often does in moments such as this, asks the man his name. So overcome by the possession, the man replies that his name is Legion, for the demons are so numerous that they have completely changed his identity.

It's easy for us to get stuck in Jesus' ability to act in a way that we are unable to relate to, the manner in which he is able to drive the demons out of the man and how he then agrees to the pleas of the spirits to be placed into the swine standing nearby. We might even get fixated on the visual of this herd of pigs jumping off the side of the cliff to their demise.

We can get stuck in the miracle itself, and miss the message altogether.

This passage from Luke reminds us of the power and challenges found in mercy and inclusion. The man is restored, fully clothed and returned to a place of mental stability, sitting at Jesus' feet. Filled with gratitude, he is eager to do whatever Jesus asks of him, even to follow him on to the next leg of his journey.

The man's neighbors, the community assembled, has a very different reaction. They are overcome with fear. This sudden change in the man, the one that they needed to protect themselves from, the one that they sent away and chained up, causes such distress that they demand that Jesus leave town.

They weren't caught up in the miracle. They weren't impressed. They were afraid.

Love and mercy changes us. And in a world that seems so deprived of it, it can shake us when we see it happen.

In the past week, there have been plenty of reasons to despair and be overcome by fear. From the shooting itself, to the response of politicians and some pastors, to the sense that solutions seem so far away.

And yet there have also been tremendous examples of love and mercy being poured out, examples of God intervening in profound ways. People came together, in prayer and vigil, in parks and churches throughout the land. In Washington, elected officials took a

stand on the Senate floor. And in LA and other cities across the country, Pride celebrations go on, as the LGBTQ community stands strong and united.

The choice offered us today is how we react to the challenges that we face—from gun violence to the structures of hate, division and polarization that prevent us from walking the path that our Creator intends. Do we act as people who have been healed, responding in gratitude by not only sitting at the feet of Jesus but by heeding the call of Jesus to go out and declare how much God has done for us? Do we go out and proclaim that another path is possible to all the corners of our city, our state and our world?

Or do we give in to fear and exhaustion and send Jesus away, deciding instead to stay stuck in the politics of division and destruction that have a hold on all of us? Do we see the possibility of restoration and reconciliation as a step in the right direction, or do we buck at the change and loss of comfort and control?

The world desperately needs us to be transformed, and to return to our homes, our streets and our communities, declaring how much God has done and will do for us.

Let us pray.

O God, your people are hurting. Many feel lost, afraid, ready to give up.

Bring us back to a place where we seek authentic community, where we long to understand each other, especially those that come from differing places and views.

You call each of us to reconciliation. Give us the strength and wisdom and temperament to get there.

For those that have died, our brothers and sisters, we pray for a peaceful rest. For those who were injured, we pray for healing. For those who fear for their safety, we pray for comfort. For those who seek to do evil, we pray for a change of heart. For those who are weary and ready to give up, we pray for courage and strength. And, for a world in need of joy, we pray for voices that laugh and sing and shout.

We ask this in the name of our loving, liberating and life-giving God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.