

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
June 19, 2016
The Rev. Robert H. Malm

Faith and Freedom

This last week I've thought a lot about the relationship between faith and freedom. Our Gospel readings from St. Luke show us the connection between faith, freedom and healing. According to Luke, Jesus brings God's liberating, redeeming, healing and freeing love to all. Last Sunday we saw this with the woman who had been healed. She was overcome with joy and gratitude. She wept on Jesus' feet, dried his feet with her hair, kissed and anointed his feet.

Today we see a man possessed by a "legion" of demons who Jesus heals by casting the demons into a herd of pigs. The man wants to accompany Jesus, join with the disciples. But Jesus tells him to go home and tell everyone what God had done.

We continue reading from St. Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul also focuses upon faith and freedom. He writes, "before faith came (meaning faith in Jesus Christ) we were imprisoned and guarded under the law..." Paul's central teaching is "for freedom Christ has set us free..." (5:1)

Last Sunday morning I was not aware of the enormous tragedy in Orlando. I saw a headline from the Washington Post on my cell phone but I didn't open it. No one mentioned it after the 7:30 am service. After the 10 am service we went right to the picnic. When I got home at about 1:30 I turned on the television and realized that 49 people had been shot and killed. Then I listened to the President's initial response.

All week, as more information has come out, I've felt a deep sadness and I've wondered how God will work through this tragedy. How will we help God to work? Death is the last enemy of faith and freedom. This is why we proclaim that Jesus has defeated the power of death.

The shooter in Orlando seemed as demon-possessed as the man in today's Gospel. But our world is so very different from 1st century Palestine. The demon-possessed man was bound with chains and shackles; he was driven naked to live among the dead in the tombs, cast out from society. The Orlando shooter, possessed by great evil in his heart and mind, could go to work, drive a car, buy guns, get past security with his guns into a crowded nightclub, and kill 49 innocent people! It is as shocking as three planes being hijacked and used to kill hundreds of people almost 15 years ago.

People of faith, then and now, respond with love, with freedom, with healing, knowing God's presence even in the midst of suffering. We cannot allow threats of terror or the possibility of death to push us into doubt, doubting God's love and God's call to justice. God calls us to use our freedom responsibly. God will surprise us, just as Jesus surprised the people of the Gerasenes in today's story.

The strangest part of the Gospel story is how the people respond – they are afraid. Luke writes that they are “seized with great fear.” Why? Because all of the pigs seemed to go crazy and drown? Because the possessed man was healed, in his right mind and listening to Jesus? I think Jesus’ freedom, his healing love frightened the people. They asked him to leave. Can faith and freedom be scary?

Jesus’ freedom and love certainly frightened the Jewish religious leaders; they plotted to have him arrested and crucified. His freedom frightened Pontius Pilate, who wanted to remain in favor with Caesar. Jesus’ freedom and love and faith even frightened his own disciples, who pleaded with him not to go to Jerusalem, not to confront the leadership.

Fear drives people to violence, to hatred, to terror. Fear can possess the human heart and mind. Fear leads to destruction and death. Faith leads to freedom and love. St. John writes that there is no fear in love. “Perfect love casts out fear.” (1 John 4:18) We will have to wait, months, maybe years to see if the Orlando tragedy will lead to more fear or to greater faith.

All last week I thought about a book I first read 40 years ago in Seminary, Jesus Means Freedom. The author, Ernst Kaseman, was born in Germany in 1906. He was a young Lutheran pastor when the Nazis came to power. He would not swear allegiance to the regime, and he preached against Hitler. In 1937 he was arrested and put in prison. After the war he became a world—renowned New Testament scholar, author and professor. He wrote his book, Jesus Means Freedom, in 1970, 25 years after the end of World War II.

I was pleased to go online and read the start of a Fortress Press review.

“Here is a book that ‘tells it like it is’ regarding what it means to be a follower of Jesus. It is a book that rigorously affirms the freedom of the Christian person, and just as rigorously refutes those who would restrict or negate this freedom in the name of Christian orthodoxy...”

Last Sunday’s horrible event in Orlando gives us all another opportunity to move from fear to faith; to move from terror and the abuse of freedom to justice and the triumph of freedom; to know that love is stronger than death; to know that God’s love never ends.

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