

June 23, 2019 2nd Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Isaiah 65:1-9, Psalm 22:19-28
Galatians 3:23-29, Luke 8:26-39

[Debie Thomas in Journey with Jesus, posted June 16, 2019, Legion.
Judith Jones in Working Preacher commentary on Luke 8:26-39, reference and a quote.]

Liberating Love

Beloved of Christ Jesus, loved and loving, colorful and whole, grace and peace to you.

There are plenty of pulpits this morning that will **ignore** all together that it is Pride Sunday,
that in 35 minutes or so one of the larger Pride Parades in the nation will kick off
just 2 miles from where we worship,
that some of you are headed that way when we're done.

They'll be nervous or uncertain, or it just won't seem to fit...So why mention it?
Why venture into the complicated territory of sexuality and gender and God's love?

And there are still more pulpits this morning that will preach against Pride,
that will pull out some particular verses,
choosing to avoid the arc of love, the arc of welcome that pulses through our Bible and our tradition.
The pressures of their theology and politics are hefty and real to them.
The Vatican's recent statement rejecting that gender can be fluid,
that's an example of this theology and these politics.

But today, this pulpit, this preacher...

I don't want to ignore Pride.
And, I certainly won't condemn it.
I want to hold it with my own, **our own**, God-made flesh and blood and brains and souls
and see how it is that Jesus has a message here for us, today, this Pride Sunday.

We are a Reconciling in Christ Congregation.

Years ago, way before my time, this congregation took a vote and made a statement that included
welcoming LGBTQ folks into the faith community's life and leadership. Amen!
Twin Cities Reconciling in Christ congregations some years have marched in the Pride Parade,
proudly adding our welcome and God's big love as we made our way through the sea of rainbows.
One time, before coming to Hope, my family and I were marching with the RIC contingent and some
members of my previous congregation.

We were sporting rainbow stoles and pastor-collars, feeling proud and strong, pushing a kid in a stroller.
That's when I noticed the president of that congregation, a wise and faithful out gay man,
in his shorts and tank top and pride parade finest.
He was sitting atop a mail box along Hennepin Avenue, cheering his heart out.
This queer pastor, seeing the queer congregational president—I cried, and I think he may have too.
We'd worked so hard together.
There was a freedom, a liberation made all the sweeter by celebrating together,

I've been thinking about that moment a lot these last days...

The power of liberating love.
In our prayer already this morning, we said, "In your mercy, God, set us free from the chains that bind us."
Set us free from the chains.

Our Gospel reading from Luke is a big and complicated story.

The man lives amidst the tombs and, we're told, and he's tormented by demons.
No longer is he clothed.
The chains and shackles have come loose.
The community knows him, perhaps he's their child, or their brother, or their spouse,
but for a long time, they've kept a distance, so he feels isolation, and he knows their fear.

Is he experiencing a mental health crisis or living with evil spirits or inhabited by demons.

We don't know, and really we don't need to know.
It's important to note:
Plenty of spiritual destruction has and surely may still be done with this passage and others like it.
Real people with real illnesses, mental illnesses, have been hurt or not cared for as they needed.
Queer folks and those differently-able have been prayed over, by people trying to remove what they see as
bad things about us, about our bodies.
I see them simply as our diverse and beautiful gifts, just how God made us.
We view this passage through our own experience, our own chains, our own liberation.

Jesus meets this man where he's at and asks him, in this wonderful Jesus-way, "What is your name?".

It's the demons in the man who reply, "Legion."
This nice healing story has suddenly become political.

In the ancient Roman world, Legion meant only one thing: a unit of Roman soldiers, 5000 or 6000 soldiers, and not just any soldiers, but occupying soldiers.

This man, like us, is bound up, **occupied**, by not one but many demons, all threatening to crush him, to deny his fullness of life.

Debie Thomas writes, “The truth is, what ails us as human beings *is* Legion.

The evil that haunts us has many faces, many names.”

She continues, “We are all — every one of us — vulnerable to forces that seek to take us over, to bind our mouths, to take away our true names, and to separate us from God and from each other.”

Maybe it’s our struggles with mental health or other illnesses.

Maybe it’s addictions, or poverty.

Maybe it’s slavery to our devices or social media, or time.

Maybe it’s dishonesty, or the past that we can’t seem to let go.

Maybe it’s the systems that imprison, or our lack of imagination or will to change these systems.

Maybe it’s hatred because of the color of our skin, or who we love, or how we understand our gender.

Maybe it’s jealousy, or judgement.

Maybe it’s decisions we wish we didn’t make, but we do.

Maybe it’s hopelessness or terror.

The demons of our world manifest themselves within our experience, within our very bodies.

The gospel good news in today’s story is this, and I quote,

Jesus challenges and casts “out the powers that prevent us

from living fully and freely as human beings created in God’s image.” (Judith Jones’ quote)

God created us in love, and seeks for us fullness of life and freedom.

And Jesus the healer, Jesus the liberator, won’t stop until that fullness is realized.

That’s the good news!

We resist this good news, oh do we ever!

It’s scary, it demands a lot.

It may have costs and usually does.

It might be uncomfortable.

It often feels dangerous.

It may just change our patterns or our own sense of identity.

But when Jesus casts out the powers of oppression, it cuts all ways:

For those who need it, he casts out the demons of fragility and shame that trigger our deep fears,
the reasons we resist in the first place.

AND for others, Jesus casts out the fear that we have for our very lives.

This liberating love is for everyone, it just meets us where we are, in our own skin, our own experience.

This Friday will be the 50th anniversary of the start of the Stonewall Riots.

Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village in New York City was a place for the poorest and most marginalized in the gay community: drag queens and trans folks, male prostitutes and butch lesbians, effeminate young men, homeless youth.

The police raided Stonewall inn—as they raided bars often in that era—in the early hours of June 28, 1969. When the neighborhood organized, more riots arose over the next nights.

This time, with just the right spark, in the spirit of civil rights marches and anti-Vietnam War protests, the gay rights movement began.

People like Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera were drag queens who became leaders in the movement at the time of the riots and through the decades that followed.

Their lives were complicated by the chains of oppression and violence, poverty and addiction.

Now days trans folks face some of these same pressures in higher instances than the rest of society, and in higher instances than the rest of the queer community.

Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, they knew something about living fully, living freely in God's image, and they knew something of the demons that constrict and crush.

I think, when we're honest, that we all do.

This Pride, this Sunday,

may the liberating love of God claim us again,
ease our fear, and
take us where we need to go.

Let us pray. Liberating God, lover of our souls, set us free from the chains that bind us, empower us to live in your good image, bless our bodies and our love, meet our fear with your courage to be more fully who you have called us to be. Amen.