

Proper 7c, after Orlando

Lectionary Text of the week: Isaiah 65:1-9; Psalm 22; Galatians 3:23-29 Luke 8:26-39

Last Sunday, we watched a tragedy unfold. I first heard the news on the radio, coming here before the early service. There had been another mass shooting.

Perhaps as many as 20 dead.

By the time the late service had ended, we had heard the full extent of the loss. By the evening, we had heard of the last tweets of victims, seen last videos sent by those who died.

Over the week we began to digest the implications of the tragedy. The GLBT loss of a sense of safety in the world, to be targeted, again, in a place of sanctuary, as gay bars have so often been. Our own fears of unstable people who can own guns without any prohibition whatsoever, confirmed, heightened. Our Muslim brothers and sisters, the ones who practice their faith in ways that reflect its beauty, under increased threat as they and their faith are used as fodder to fuel the flames of intolerance, hatred and fear.

And over the week, we continued to watch another unfolding tragedy: We have witnessed hateful people, politicians the people have elected, given power to, suggest that the GLBT community got what they deserved.

We have heard Donald Trump proclaim that common sense gun laws called for by Clinton and others amounted to the full erasure of the 2nd amendment itself. We have heard Trump accuse our president of, just perhaps, being on the side of terrorists. We have seen the pain and confusion on the faces of republican politicians who some of us might never vote for, but whom we can't help but respect for their honesty about the danger posed by the presumed republican nominee.

We have heard those who know pretty much nothing about the teachings of Islam, name it as a violent religion, without any appreciation for the ways in which good religions can be hijacked by people of unscrupulous intent. People who twist its message to meet their own sick, ends. We ought to know better. The hijacking of a faith tradition can happen anywhere, by anyone. It has happened to Christianity and it could happen again.

This has been a week when we have watched wave after wave of ill-informed hatred, and we have watched common sense be twisted and exploited for the feeding of an immature, damaged ego who may one day have access to nuclear launch codes. Not only for the friends and loved ones of those killed in Orlando, but for us all, this has been a tragic week in so many, oftentimes shocking, ways.

And so, isn't it interesting that this week our lectionary presents us with a lesson about evil, the consequences of evil and the hope that exists in the face of evil. The story is of a man who is possessed by demons. 7 demons. 7 being the Biblical number that signals completeness. If man is possessed of 7 demons, he is completely possessed.

Let's just leave aside for a moment that in the ancient world, someone with mental illness, or epilepsy was thought to be demon possessed. This healing story is about a different kind of illness, a spiritual illness, and our raving maniac a good example of what can happen to any of us if evil enters our soul.

A word about evil itself must be said, as well. The Old and New testament take the reality of evil very seriously. Evil is understood to be a spiritual disease, a perversion of the heart, the mind and the soul. Evil is understood to be that spiritual reality which spawns behavior that is contrary to God's desire for us to be people of depth, integrity, wisdom and compassionate justice.

Evil is a force that exists alongside God's goodness. In the Old testament, in the theology of Judaism, the goal, as people of faith, is not to eliminate evil. It is understood that humans can't eliminate evil—we don't have that much power. All we can do is recognize that it exists and take steps to avoid, ourselves, falling under its influence or acting on its impulses. It is the Law—the 10 Commandments. that is meant to help us to do that.

In Christianity, our understanding of evil is much the same, and our armor against it is made more explicit: if we are willing to learn God's ways, as they are shown in the living and teachings of Jesus, then we have a better chance than not of avoiding being caught by the greedy tentacles of evil. Doing so, avoiding the engagement of or practice of evil can be costly, we are reminded. Just look at what happened to Jesus. But disengagement from evil also leads to new life.

God's love, in the end, is the only force that really can defeat evil. It is defeated when we accept that love as it is offered to us by Jesus Christ, God's love Incarnate. When we accept that fact that while we don't have the power to defeat evil, love does. Love does when we are willing to learn and practice the teachings of love's greatest ambassador—Jesus. The Law—the 10 commandments, can tell us what to do, but only God can help us to do it. Only love can teach us to *be* that love too.

And therein lies the hope. That Jesus comes into the world as encouragement for the Jews, and invitation to the gentiles. You can learn to love, if you wish, God says through Jesus. You can learn to live the love that is laid out in the law. You can embody it too. You can be love given flesh.

And so, in our gospel reading, the demons are cast out, the man freed of evil –not a health condition because remember, Jesus is again using the sensibilities of the age to demonstrate a reality that transcends all ages: that in the end, love wins. In the end, the only thing that really can defeat the insanity caused by the evil that is constantly threatening to determine the course of our lives and our world, ---is the practice of love of God and neighbor.

This week I have been thinking of something that Moses said to the Israelites as they were about to cross over, finally, into the promised land. After leading them around the wilderness for 40 years, after teaching them the law of God found on those 2 stone tablets, after forming a community that was strong and purposeful and ready to settle down on the land and enter the world stage as a nation, Moses delivers to the people a speech that is both cautionary and hopeful to us, thousands of years later.

See, Moses says: God has laid before you a choice. One choice leads to life, and the other leads to death. The practice of the law, meant to help you live peacefully, respectfully with each other-- and with even the strangers who are your neighbors too; that is the pathway to life and health. But, forget who you are, who you are meant to be, who God means you to be, a holy people, wander away from that promise? Then you will find yourselves on a very different path. It is the path of death.

You have a choice about your future, Moses tells the people--the choice between life and death. Choose life, he advises. Or pleads. Or cautions. Choose life. I think that we, as Americans, as Christians, have that same choice before us. In fact, I think that as people of faith the choice between pathways of good and evil, of life, and death, come before us again and again and again.

They come before us today as we must make the hard decision to choose the hope that we are meant to practice love, can learn to practice love, over the death dealing choices of hatred, cynicism and moral laziness. The death dealing choice of seeking easy, comfortable answers to the very complex challenges before us at this time in human history. In times like this it is important to remember Jesus can only cast out the demons, God can only repair the insult of evil, if we choose love, hope and human dignity – the path of life, to be the pathway we choose to follow.