

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA June 19, 2022

Restoration

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The 8th chapter of Luke is a rich one for learning about Christ's priorities and how he would have us follow on his Way. The chapter begins by highlighting the diverse nature of his followers; verses 1-3 mention the twelve, along with several women who had become followers too. Then Luke shares the parable of the sower, describing a prodigally wasteful sower who spreads the seed (the word of God¹) anywhere and everywhere. No wonder women are becoming disciples, rebelling against the patriarchal culture of his time, unlike other Rabbis of the time, Jesus shares his teachings with anyone and everyone, including women.

Then we have the brief parable of the lamp under a jar in which Jesus indicates that God's word cannot be hidden, it will shine forth no matter what. And we learn that God's word will reveal what is hidden and bring what is secret out into sight. God's word, which is first and foremost Jesus Christ, will plant and grow faith in those who encounter it, while those who willfully ignore it will lose out on life-giving faith (at least for now, after all, "with God all things are possible"²).

In keeping with these parables about the word of God, Jesus uses the arrival of his mother and brothers to teach that any in whom the word of God takes root is not only a follower of his Way, but even a sibling to him! The seed of the word of God, planted in our hearts and growing faith in us, makes us a part of God's family. The word of God unites us as one communion, one faith, one family in Christ.

Luke goes on to show Christ's power over nature in verses 22-25 of Luke 8. But even in that brief narrative on the lake, Jesus raises the issue of faith to his disciples. When confronted with the disciples' panic over the storm he

¹ Luke 8:11 (NRSV)

² Mark 10:27; Matthew 19:26; Luke 18:27 (NRSV)

asks them where their faith is. These twelve disciples have had the seed of God's word thrown on the soil of their hearts and minds more than most, yet they still have little to no faith. They are still trapped by doubts and fears, not yet understanding what faith means, what the Way of Christ is about.

After all of this talk about the word of God and faith in the first section of Luke 8, we then delve into two different, yet very related encounters between Jesus and people on the outskirts of their communities. We seem to be watching as Jesus sows the seed of the word of God in some truly prodigal ways. Most Rabbis would have avoided the demoniac, Jairus' daughter, and the woman with the issue of blood; but not Jesus, the prodigal sower of God's life-giving, faith-creating, and community-restoring word!

And that is exactly what the word of God is in these encounters. It is certainly all of the things that Jesus has said before these encounters: a light that cannot be hidden, a seed that can take root in people's lives, and a means of entry into God's family. But these encounters show us that it is also a power strong enough to still a wild storm. A love deep enough to drown out a legion of demons. A grace potent enough to welcome and accept the unclean. And a life vigorous enough to raise the dead.

The word of God is ever active, ever at work in us and through us. And its work is the work of Christ, who is the word. And what is this work? It is the work of restoration. Jesus restores people to wholeness, again and again. He restores people's bodies, he restores their minds, he restores their spirits, but perhaps most important of all, he restores people to relationships and community.

In his encounter with the Gerasene demoniac Jesus clearly restores his mind, and in so doing he begins to restore the body as well; healing there will come with time. Restoring his spirit however, that will take longer. And it will take more time because it means restoring relationship and community as well. In Christ, the former demoniac's spirit has its rest, but he will not get to remain with Jesus. Rather, Jesus gives him a command, a command that will lead to greater restoration and wholeness: "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you."³

What a difficult task! Return to the community that gave up on you long ago. Return to the community that had likely grown fearful of you. Return to the

³ Luke 8:39a (NRSV)

community that must have warned its children about you. Return to the community who has been harmed by your actions. Return to the community that now has reason to blame you for its economic woes (after all, your healing caused an entire herd of swine to be drowned).

But that is the task ahead of him. The hard and difficult work of restoration, of reconciliation. Imagine the next days and weeks for this man. Convincing people that he is no longer a threat to them. Seeking forgiveness from those he harmed. Working to forgive those that harmed him. There's likely a mountain of resentment and anger to be overcome. Restoration is **hard** work!

And restoration to wholeness only comes when the forces inside us that impede it are dealt with. The exorcism of Legion was an important first step in this man's restoration. Just as the exorcism of the legion of forces inside each of us is an important first step. What are the forces we need to have exorcised? All those that hinder love of God and love of neighbor. All those forces that create barriers and divisions.

On this Juneteenth, and two days after the commemoration of the Emmanuel Nine, we acknowledge that in the ELCA (one of the whitest denominations in America) we have hard work to do exorcising the forces of racism and white supremacy from ourselves and our systems. More broadly in America we have to confront the forces of racism, homophobia, transphobia, neo-imperialism, "Christian" nationalism, patriotic idolatry, and on and on and on. All these beliefs and systems do not lead to wholeness, they hinder and impede attempts to craft authentic community. They are anti-love and therefore anti-Gospel.

Jesus would exorcise these from us, Jesus has exorcised these from us. But we're lousy at seeing that and living it out. Jesus has taught us all that is necessary to be completely rid of this evil, if we're willing to do the work. Jesus freed the demoniac from terrible forces, and then set him on the path to true wholeness and restoration. In Christ we have been freed from the barriers and divisions we have created. After all, as my wife's favorite passage reminded us this morning, "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."⁴

⁴ Galatians 3:28 (NRSV)

The chains that have bound us in beliefs and systems of division and brokenness have been sundered. Now the question before us is do we love the chains more than Christ? Will we pick those chains back up because we find them easier than the work of restoration? Will we hang on to them because we derive some twisted comfort out of using them to harm others?

Or will we seek to truly be free of those chains of division and brokenness? Will we commit to the Way of Christ. The Way that leads to true wholeness, deep and compassionate relationship, and the community, the kingdom, of God? I know the way that I would go, I pray God gives me the strength to follow it.

And it does take strength. The work of restoration and healing can be exhausting. It means confronting our very selves, opening our eyes to the harm we have intentionally, and unintentionally, caused others. It means admitting that the ELCA is steeped in white supremacy, and that we have deeply rooted messages of privilege at work in our selves. It means doing the hard work of confession and reconciliation; asking forgiveness from those we have harmed, both historically and in the here and now. The Way of Christ is not an easy one...but it is the only life-giving one.

In Christ we have been made whole. In Christ we have been freed from the evil forces within us. In Christ we have been made one community, one family. We know the way, we know the work, we know the end goal. Now our work of restoration begins. So, return to your homes my siblings in Christ, and declare what God has done for you, what God has freed you from. And out of that freedom seek restoration, seek reconciliation, seek the oneness of community we have been promised.

Amen.