

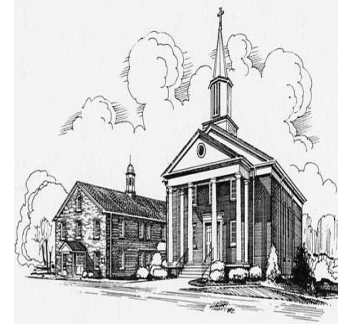
The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Sunday closest to June 22

Proper 7

Year C

RCL



Isaiah 65:1-9

Psalms 22:18-27

Luke 8:26-39

The Collect

O Lord, make us have perpetual love and reverence for your holy Name, for you never fail to help and govern those whom you have set upon the sure foundation of your loving-kindness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 22:18-27 Page 611, BCP

Deus, Deus meus

Be not far away, O LORD;

you are my strength; hasten to help me.

Save me from the sword,

my life from the power of the dog.

Save me from the lion's mouth,

my wretched body from the horns of wild bulls.

I will declare your Name to my brethren;

in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.

Praise the LORD, you that fear him;

stand in awe of him, O offspring of Israel;

all you of Jacob's line, give glory.

For he does not despise nor abhor the poor in their poverty;

neither does he hide his face from them;

but when they cry to him he hears them.

My praise is of him in the great assembly;

I will perform my vows in the presence of those
who worship him.

**The poor shall eat and be satisfied,
and those who seek the LORD shall praise him:
“May your heart live for ever!”**

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the
LORD,
and all the families of the nations shall bow before
him.

**For kingship belongs to the LORD;
he rules over the nations.**

Isaiah 65:1-9

I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask,
to be found by those who did not seek me.

I said, “Here I am, here I am,”
to a nation that did not call on my name.

I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people,
who walk in a way that is not good,
following their own devices;

a people who provoke me
to my face continually,
sacrificing in gardens
and offering incense on bricks;
who sit inside tombs,
and spend the night in secret places;
who eat swine's flesh,
with broth of abominable things in their vessels;
who say, “Keep to yourself,
do not come near me, for I am too holy for you.”

These are a smoke in my nostrils,
a fire that burns all day long.

See, it is written before me:

I will not keep silent, but I will repay;

I will indeed repay into their laps
their iniquities and their ancestors' iniquities together,
says the LORD;
because they offered incense on the mountains
and reviled me on the hills,
I will measure into their laps
full payment for their actions.
Thus says the LORD:
As the wine is found in the cluster,
and they say, "Do not destroy it,
for there is a blessing in it,"
so I will do for my servants' sake,
and not destroy them all.
I will bring forth descendants from Jacob,
and from Judah inheritors of my mountains;
my chosen shall inherit it,
and my servants shall settle there.

Luke 8:26-39

Jesus and his disciples arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me” – for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go

back into the abyss.

Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he

got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

SERMON

If you hang around police stations as much as I once did, you'll hear from time to time a word of gratitude for the bad guys because, let's face it, if there were no bad guys, there would be no policemen. It's weird how intertwined the two groups are. What is even more surprising is how full of words we are about getting tough on crime, because if you take time to look at what we actually do about crime, you will, I guarantee, come away scratching your head. To my observation, we actually do more to insure that we retain a criminal underclass than we do to reducing it.

What I'd like to do today is to view, through the lens of this Gospel story, the odd way we deal with problems in our society. To make it easier, I'd suggest that we take on the role of an alien from Arcturus recently arrived in a super-duper spaceship. What would

such an observer notice? What would strike him as odd about our approach to crime and violence?

Additionally, let's move the entire discussion to an equally alien place, the communities of the Decapolis which is where our Gospel story takes place. Decapolis means "ten cities". The ten cities had been founded or expanded to the south east of the Sea of Galilee by Alexander the Great, who settled them with Macedonian veterans. Those veterans were proud Greeks. Then came Rome. At the time we arrive in our spaceship, the Decapolis has been under Roman occupation for a century, an occupation which had followed a brutal war. The proud Greeks are not all that shot in the head with Rome, but they are stuck with them, their freedom only a faint memory from the past.

When we disembark from our space ship and begin to learn about these people we find that one of the ten

cities, Gerasene, has a singular citizen, a man so off his head that he runs around naked, lives in the tombs and is reputed to be so strong that he cannot be restrained, breaking the chains and fetters with which he is sometimes bound.

We visitors from Arcturus may have been born at night, but it wasn't last night, and something about this story just doesn't make sense. How is it that a crazy man living naked in the tombs is sufficiently well fed to run around town making a nuisance of himself? What do these people mean by asserting that it is impossible to bind him? Surely making a sturdy chain isn't beyond these people? What is really going on with this guy?

The more you apply yourself to these questions, the more convinced you become that somebody is feeding him and making weak chains because he is contributing something to the community that is valued, albeit sub-

consciously. What could it be? Unless we come to grips with that question, we are going to misunderstand what Jesus did with the man and with the community.

Our First Century author describes the man as having demons, but when Jesus ordered the unclean spirit to depart and asked its name the unclean spirit answered, “Legion”. That’s an interesting choice of words, “Legion”. The Greek word for Legion is a borrow word from Latin and means just what it says – a Roman Legion, about 6,000 men. The unclean spirit didn’t say “many”. It said, “Legion”. The cities of the Decapolis were, indeed, possessed by Legions — Roman Legions. We visitors from the stars would be forgiven if we began to suspect a connection.

The Greeks of the Decapolis had, in the past, raised themselves up against Rome and had suffered the usual fate of places that raised themselves up against Rome,

but if Roman rule was unpleasant to the proud Greeks, it was not an unalloyed curse. Roman rule also brought prosperity. The Greeks of the Decapolis were living under enforced limitations and they had to remind themselves constantly that they must adhere to those limitations. No longer could they be proud Greeks. Now they must be good Romans. What better way to act out this drama than by scapegoating one of their number, a mentally ill man who lives in the tombs, to remind them that failure to adhere to the rules of their culture would bring death, a mentally ill man who suffers as they suffer, but who yet retains the memory of a proud strong people who cannot be bound?

We can be pretty sure that we are following the correct analysis if we look at the response of the people when they learned that the demoniac had been healed.

Then all the people of the surrounding country

of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear.

The healing of the demoniac was literally a revolutionary act. The culture perpetuated the plight of this man because it served the community to do so. Jesus restored the man because God loves his children and will not permit them to be so cruelly scapegoated. Jesus is showing them that the power of Rome, which had twisted them and which they feared, is not the ultimate power. There is a power which can restore that which has been laid wrong. The people of the Decapolis saw revolution in Jesus' act and it terrified them. They could not embrace the healing. Instead, they demanded that Jesus' revolutionary word leave them. Better the suffering you know than a freedom you don't trust.

This is what is meant when we say that the church must speak truth to power, and what we observe hap-

pening when it attempts to do so. People of faith in North Carolina representing congregations from mainline, Jewish and Catholic conferencesⁱ have joined together to speak truth to the North Carolina legislature and in opposition to legislation they see as contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a program they named “Moral Monday”. Here’s what happened:

State Sen. Thom Goolsby ... from Wilmington and an investments adviser, penned an op-ed about the protests that ran last week in the Chatham Journal. Its title? “Moron Monday shows the radical Left just doesn't get it.” He likened the protests to a “circus ... complete with clowns, a carnival barker and a sideshow.” He called the protesters “mostly white, angry, aged former hippies” and the “Loony Left.”

... Goolsby also said that state NAACP President Rev. Dr. William Barber — pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Goldsboro, N.C., a mainline Protestant denomination — was “decked out like a

prelate of the Church of Rome ... complete with stole and cassock. All he was missing was a miter and the ensemble would have been complete.”¹

One of the best ways to discern the weakness of a social system is to discover what it excludes from conversation². By Wednesday of this week, 480 of them had been arrested. They were thrown in jail for speaking truth to power. The powers that be in North Carolina threw apostles of Christ from mainline denominations, Presbyterians if you will! into prison for coming before them and suggesting that Christ values the poor and the helpless.

Did the people of the Decapolis think about the decision they were making when they asked Jesus to leave? I think almost certainly not. They were trying to preserve their century-old culture of accommodating

1 <http://www.southernstudies.org/2013/06/how-not-to-respond-to-peaceful-protesters-lessons-.html>

2 Walter Wink, “Unmasking the Powers”

the Romans. The weakness of their society is that their fear of Rome excluded the saving Grace of Jesus from conversation.

This is just the place where we get stymied as well. What are the things we exclude from conversation? I began this talk with the assertion that “We are full of words about getting tough on crime, but if you really take time to look at what we do about it, you will, I guarantee, come away scratching your head.” Just as the people of the Decapolis had devised a scapegoat so we have done as well, developing an underclass of scapegoats upon which we can project our fears and upon which we can loose our violence. This is the place where several of you will get angry with me, so I’m warning you in advance. If you were looking for a nice message about people two thousand years ago which has no application to our evolved society, you should

doze off now.

Just as the culture of the Decapolis was in tension between two great myths – the myth of Rome’s irresistible power, and the myth of Greek independence – the culture of the United States of America is also informed by two great myths – the myth of redemptive violence, that a violent response is the only appropriate and effective response to threat, and the myth fostered by Horatio Alger – that with pluck, luck, and hard work anyone can rise to the top. Both myths are demonic and destructive, leaving a trail of blood and tears through our history. Like the people of Gerasene, however, we have agreed not to see the systemic failures these two great myths represent. Instead, we focus on those who have been left behind by our increasingly technical society reasoning that if they have not succeeded, they must not have applied pluck, luck and hard work. We

focus on individuals who have no access to prosperity who have fallen into the pit of addiction and crime then vent our violence upon them, for the myth of redemptive violence teaches us that our salvation rests in responding to violence with violence.

We pay young workers a cruel wage. When they become exhausted by the demands of working two or three minimum wage jobs they fall out of the job market. Often they turn to drugs or petty theft. They have been driven into the tombs by our worship of Horatio Alger's myth of pluck, luck and hard work and there they become scapegoats who absorb the blame for the inequities of our decisions.

Don't get me wrong. I didn't roll off the turnip truck last night. I know that there are people who wouldn't work in a pie factory. We are a quarter billion people. Why should that be surprising? What I am not confident

of is our ability to discern between those who are just lazy and those who are crushed beneath the wheels of a system which needs an underclass to which it can feel superior. What I am asking is why does this country have a class called “the working poor”, and what sort of things are our policies doing to keep them there? When the church speaks the truth of Jesus’ great two commandments, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself”³ why does our evolved society still throw His apostles in jail?

One of the best ways to discern the weakness of a social system is to discover what it excludes from conversation. By focusing on those things, which we dare not mention, we can see where we have deviated from

³ Luke 10.27

God's way, for God does dare to mention them.

Living as people of faith in obedience to Jesus' teachings while living within a secular culture with its own very different rules and reasons demands compromise. Something must bend. Something must break. That something must not be the teachings of Jesus. Recall the words of Joshua.

But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.⁴

This is why we prayed today:

Life is sometimes like a giant spider web. We seem to get caught and entangled in its threads, not knowing which way to turn or how to extricate ourselves from the dilemmas in which we are trapped. Lord, you know that so many of these dilemmas and burdens are of our own creation, coming out of our stubbornness and fear. We find it much easier to turn our back on peo-

⁴ Joshua 24:15 New International Version © 2011

ple in need, or just write a check and hope that the problems go away. Forgive us when we decide not to become involved in the solution, when we would rather back off from helping and turn and run for cover. Give us an extra measure of courage and strength along with your forgiving love, that we may again place our whole trust in you.

No, you do not have the power to change the things within the secular society which deviate from God's plan. You do have the obligation to confront them. Jesus spoke neither to gay marriage nor abortion, but constantly of our obligations to the poor. Go ye and do likewise, speaking truth to power, for such is the church's calling.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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- i The Unitarian Universalist, United Church of Christ, Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Durham, Carolina Jews for Justice, Episcopal Dioceses of North Carolina and Western North Carolina, Synod of North Carolina of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbytery of New Hope and Presbytery of Charlotte of the Presbyterian Church USA, the Catholic Diocese of Raleigh and the North Carolina and Western North Carolina Conferences of the United Methodist Church