

A sermon preached by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 24, 2007, dedicated to The Rev. Dr. John Thomas and The United Church of Christ on our 50th Birthday, to the staff of Re-Member in Pine Ridge South Dakota and always to the glory of God!

“Welcomed into Community”

Galatians 3: 23-29, Luke 8:23-37

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

The Bible is filled with regular people who end up in extraordinary circumstances. Have you ever been so filled with demonic spirits that you lived tombs or in the wilderness? That’s extraordinary. Yet in our Gospel reading, Luke tells us of a man in this situation. Named “Legion,” meaning one possessed by a legion of spirits (A legion of Roman soldiers numbered 6,000), this man had grown accustomed to his life even in all its misery and pain (drawn from *Sojourners Magazine*, June 2007, Malinda Elizabeth Berry, p. 48).

The man’s community had also grown used to his extraordinary situation. This Gentile community located on the Syrian side of the Sea of Galilee had set up a whole system of constraints on this ordinary man with an extraordinary condition. They bound him with chains. They guarded him. They kept him apart from the others in the community. They feared his uncontrollable condition, but out of his pain and misery, at some level they recognized his humanity. They did not kill him for they saw him as someone’s son, someone’s brother and perhaps someone’s husband and someone’s father.

In the midst of uncontrollable, extraordinary conditions which beset ordinary people, human communities are reminded that they cannot control the outcome of such things. As with other Gospel stories, we as human beings cannot control the outcome of storms and seas. And we ultimately cannot stop death from coming even to the best, the brightest, the most beloved among us. But, at times, extraordinary healers enter our stories and push back the uncontrollable - at least for a little while. Enter Jesus . . .

In this story, Jesus gets out of his fisherman's boat, climbs on to shore and is immediately met by "Legion." Upon meeting Jesus, the demons ask permission to go into the swine herd and Jesus gives them permission. The herds of swine runs down the steep bank and drown in the sea. The man is cleansed and becomes immediately ready to be reintegrated back into society. Now the community faces another kind of fear. How will they accept the no longer extraordinary back into their ordinary life together?

Now this is a Bible story to which we can really relate!

In fact, it is at this point this story becomes our story. What happens to us and among us when we are confronted with facing and accepting "the no longer extraordinary into our ordinary life together?" When someone is cancer free or returns after a long illness, when a member of our church returns after the death of a loved one, or when a soldier returns from Iraq or Afghanistan, *how do we welcome them back into the community?*

Moreover, what happens when the seemingly uncontrollable people, those inexorable ones in our society, come to be with us? When one classified as an "illegal alien" comes to church or a newly arrived immigrant becomes a citizen, *how do we welcome them into our community?* When a prisoner, or someone who has committed a crime we find heinous and reprehensible returns from jail and therapy with a clean bill of health; when an alcoholic becomes clean and

sober; when someone suffering the misery and pain of mental illness becomes stronger; when a man, woman, or child living with HIV/ AIDS enters our house of worship, *how do we welcome them into our community?* Do we continue to smile, embrace them, and genuinely and gently prove that “God is Still Speaking” or do we avoid them, ignore them, and thus create a new extraordinary condition of rejection in the face of much needed love and grace?

For the last three Sundays, we have looked at our United Church of Christ. And today, in Hartford, Connecticut, thousands of people, including our own nationally honored lay leader, Arlene Reynolds, are worshiping together to celebrate 50 years of our denominational life together. We have examined our history and wondered about our future life together. At one point, we heard that we can’t predict the future - true. But, how we have lived our faith in the past can be a good barometer of how we might live in the future.

I believe that if we practice what we preach in the UCC - or better yet - preach what we practice - our future will be like the bright morning star. If we practice extravagant welcome for the ones like “Legion” in today’s Gospel lesson, all will be well with our communal soul. In extending our welcome to all God’s children, we become a light to this nation and to the world. When this happens, nothing can put out the light of God shining within us!

For, when we are a church of extravagant welcome and open our arms to those whom God has restored, the ones whom God has sent among us, we practice what Maria Isasi-Diaz describes as “*lo cotidiano*” or “*Sacred ordinariness.*” “Sacred ordinariness” is the key to holy boldness. Bold choices and bold actions grow out of everyday experiences and when we act and live this way, it shows we are paying serious attention to what our choices mean. By living in “sacred ordinariness,” we are more open to the Spirit of God because this way of living guards against indifference, avoidance, and injustice.

Yesterday, two members of our denomination, Journalist Bill Moyers and Senator Barack Obama of Illinois spoke to our General Synod in Hartford, Connecticut. Speaking first, Bill Moyers lamented the growing gap between the rich and poor in America and called the UCC to act in the name of the Jesus who was a disturber of the peace and threw the rascals out.

“I have come to say that America’s revolutionary heritage — and America’s revolutionary spirit — “life, liberty and the pursuit of justice, through government of, by, and for the people” — is under siege . . . And if churches of conscience don’t take the lead in their rescue and revival, we can lose our democracy . . . You have raised a prophetic voice against the militarism, materialism and racism that chokes America’s arteries . . . You have placed yourselves in the thick of the fight for social justice . . . You have aligned yourself on the side of liberty, equality and compassion.”

“Poverty and justice are religious issues,” he said, “and Jesus moves among the disinherited.”

He imagined Jesus *“striding through the holy precincts that had been transformed into a marketplace, a stock exchange, upsetting the dealers, scattering their money across the floor, even bouncing them forcefully from the temple . . . Indignant at a profane violation of the sacred, Jesus threw the rascals out,”* he said.

Issuing what amounted to an altar call from this former Southern Baptist preacher from Texas, Moyers reminded the crowd of that Jesus, and concluded: *“Let’s call that Jesus back to duty, and drive the money changers from the temple of democracy . . . If you don’t, who will?”*

Later in the day, Senator Obama challenged the United Church of Christ to become part of the Joshua generation. Speaking of the story in Deuteronomy 30, when Moses passes the mantle of leadership to Joshua, Barack Obama spoke of the challenges faced by Joshua’s generation once they entered the Promised Land without Moses. Senator Obama said:

“To the Joshua generation, these challenges seem momentous – and they are. But Moses says: What I am commanding you is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven. Nor is it beyond the sea. No, the word is very near. It is on your lips and in your heart.

It’s an idea that’s often forgotten or dismissed in cynical times. It’s that we all have it within our power to make this a better world. Because we all have the capacity to do justice and show mercy; to treat others with dignity and respect; and to rise above what divides us and come together to meet those challenges we can’t meet alone. It’s the wisdom Moses imparted to those who would succeed him. And it’s a lesson we need to remember today — as members of another Joshua generation.

So let’s rededicate ourselves to a new kind of politics — a politics of conscience. Let’s come together — Protestant and Catholic, Muslim and Hindu and Jew, believer and non-believer alike. We’re not going to agree on everything, but we can disagree without being disagreeable. We can affirm our faith without endangering the separation of church and state, as long as we understand that when we’re in the public square, we have to speak in universal terms that everyone can understand. And if we can do that — if we can embrace a common destiny — then I believe we’ll not just help bring about a more hopeful day in America, we’ll not just be caring for our own souls, we’ll be doing God’s work here on Earth.

This past week, I was blessed to spend time with our First Church members of the “Joshua Generation” on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. I saw regular people perform extraordinary acts of love. In the midst of extreme poverty, I saw “sacred ordinariness” in the smiles and laughter of children, in the reaching hands of adults, and in random acts of kindness by total strangers extended to some of God’s most oppressed children walking this land we call America and native people simply call “Mother

Earth.” Although I will preach more about these experiences in sermons yet to come, I will say that I am proud today to be pastor for the 11 young women and the four other adults who were my fellow travelers this week to a land filled with mystery and blessings among a people filled with misery and pain, as well as a gentleness and peace that passes right over my human understanding. I am also proud to be pastor to the rest of you. Your offerings, your prayers, your letters, your thoughts, your teaching of these youth, your nurturing of these adults gave them strength for this journey and hope in serving others in immense need. Thank you.

As we were leaving Friday, I spoke with Tom, the director of Re-Member. We had brought Dorinda White’s green stole as a gift from First Church to Re-Member. The stole had fish, grass, animals and other earth symbols on it. Tom asked for a biography of Dorinda and then said, “We will build a glass case and treasure this gift forever.” He said, “You have a remarkable group and obviously a great church. We will treasure this forever.”

All week long, we were blessed by the presence of an additional 50 men, women and youth of the United Church of Christ. All week long, I saw these regular people reach out and touch the lives of the Oglala Lakota Indians and others whom they have adopted into their tribe - our brothers and sisters whom America has certainly forsaken and mostly forgotten. When I ask is our future bright in the United Church of Christ, I only need to close my eyes and remember. The answer is, “Yes ... God willing. Yes!”

Amen.