

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
June 19, 2022 – 2 Pentecost
Isaiah 65:1-9; Psalm 22:18; Luke 8:26-39
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The first line of the psalm we read together this morning probably sounds very familiar to us: "Be not far away, O Lord; you are my strength; hasten to help me." The psalms are full of prayers like this. I opened the Bible at random and found these examples of opening verses: "Hear my cry, O God, heed my prayer" from Psalm 61. "Hear my voice, O God, when I plead" from Psalm 64. "Deliver me, O God, for the waters have reached my neck" from Psalm 69. "Hasten, O God, to save me; O Lord, to aid me!" from Psalm 70. We are constantly praying that God will listen to us and will hurry up and do what we ask to help us.

This morning's reading from the book of Isaiah shifts our perspective radically. The speaker here is God, and from God's point of view the relationship between divine and human action looks very different. God declares, "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." The image is an image of prayer, of supplication. Here God is holding out God's hands in supplication to the people. Imagine!

But God's supplication often fails. Many people "walk in a way that is not good." The passage describes pagan practices that some of the Israelites had adopted. Specifically noted are those "who sit inside tombs" and "who eat swine's flesh." Sitting inside tombs refers to the worship of deceased ancestors, a practice common among the Canaanites. Related to this were rites among the Hittites and some Canaanites in which pigs were sacrificed to underworld deities or the gods of the dead. The final insult to God's supplication – the people who say, "Keep to yourself, do not come near me." The Lord is clearly angry – and with good reason – with those who walk in ways which are not good. In contrast, God promises blessings to those who seek and serve God, who walk in God's ways.

Tombs and pigs. The obvious connection between this passage from Isaiah and our reading from Luke, the healing of the Gerasene demoniac.

Jesus and his disciples have traveled by boat across the Sea of Galilee to a place outside the land of Israel, into an area populated primarily by non-Jewish people. So we shouldn't be surprised at the presence of a large herd of swine there. Raising pigs was a major source of income for the Gerasenes. Immediately upon his arrival, Jesus meets a very frightening madman. He lived among the dead, naked, so violent that he had to be watched and bound with chains. According to the understanding of the time, this man was possessed by evil forces – a legion of demons – which caused his mental disorder. Demons were from the supernatural world, so it is not surprising that they recognize Jesus as a person of God and a powerful opponent of the forces that hurt, oppress, or alienate life. Jesus is a healer, a restorer of life. He has power to cast out demons, and he uses that power to heal the man. The power of Jesus is greater than the power of evil. Event after event in the gospels show us this fact.

The demons had begged Jesus not to send them "back into the abyss." The abyss was the netherworld, the abode of the dead and imprisoned spirits. Perhaps the demons thought they would be better off entering the herd of swine. But when the demons entered the swine, "the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned." We can imagine the reaction of the swineherds! Of course they ran off and told everyone what Jesus had done.

The madman healed and the swine destroyed! Seeing the power of Jesus, the people were afraid. They asked him to go away, “so he got into the boat and returned.” In contrast to the others, the man who was healed begged to be allowed to stay with Jesus. But Jesus had a mission for him to accomplish – “return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.”

We must not ignore another reason the Gerasenes wanted Jesus to leave. He had shown himself to be a threat to their economic welfare. Even though he clearly had immense power to heal – and no doubt there were many people in that region who were in need of healing, as there were everywhere Jesus went – they wanted Jesus to go away. Even though he had relieved them of the burden of keeping watch over the madman, they didn’t want him to destroy another herd of swine. They didn’t want to risk losing any more of their capital.

Looked at with the eyes of the world, Jesus is an economic threat. His teaching is in line with teaching of the Old Testament, which is essentially this: wealth should be distributed more or less equally among all the people of the community, and, failing that, the community as a whole should make sure that the poorest among them have access to the basic necessities of life. That means that those who are more blessed with resources must share with those who have less. Remember, too, the encounter between Jesus and the rich ruler. In answer to the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?,” Jesus replies, “sell what you own, and give the money to the poor; ... then come, follow me” (Mark 10:21). Many Christians – some of them “famous,” like St. Francis – have taken these words literally. That’s radical, voluntary poverty. Less radical is the model we find in The Acts of the Apostles, where we learn that in the early Christian community “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45).

This morning’s readings are powerful and challenging. What would happen if we took the lesson from Isaiah to heart, as individuals and as a church? What if we shifted our perspective to God’s point of view, as Isaiah guides?

God is our creator who has given us life and all the blessings of life. God is ready to be sought after. God wants to be in relationship with us. How are we responding? We don’t sacrifice pigs to the gods of the dead or sit inside tombs to worship our deceased ancestors because those aren’t the ways we are tempted to embrace the practices of the culture of non-believers in which we live. But we do indeed choose to ignore God and embrace many of the values and activities of the secular world. We do, in action, say to God, “Keep to yourself, do not come near me” and to Jesus, “Go away.” When we don’t pray. When we don’t worship God, either on our own or with others. When we keep asking for more and more from God and neglect to be thankful for all that God has done for us. When we don’t do what we know God wants us to do – show compassion and mercy, work for justice, help people in need, love God and our neighbors as ourselves. When we grasp the world’s resources for ourselves and fail to share them. In these and countless other ways we send a message to God: “Keep to yourself, do not come near me” and to Jesus, “Go away.”

Can we step away from the ways of the secular world in which we live and see the call to thankfulness and generosity as God’s gracious invitation to life, to freedom, and to joy? God’s hands are open to bless us and open to plead for us to trust God and walk in God’s ways. All for love. What will we choose to do? How will we open our hearts and our hands for the love of Christ? How will we declare how much God has done for us? For the love of Christ, our healer and our savior. Amen.