

We have a story today about traveling into the unknown and being confronted by an enormous power intent on evil. I hope that this raises some uncomfortable questions for you about our own fears and pre-conceived notions about the people we know as 'strangers'.

Luke tells us about a time when Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee to the land of the Gerasenes – Gentile territory filled with people who were ritually impure and strange. You know: people not like us who make us uncomfortable.

Jesus was intentional about this trip. Even after a storm at sea, they didn't return home but pressed on – to the other side, into the unknown.

Now, I wonder how important it is to us – as followers of Jesus - to get to the other side – to go into unknown territory and encounter folks who are different from us? Does our faith call us to reach out to others, or are they someone else's responsibility?

Today, the disciples barely get their feet on the sand, before they are accosted by their worst expectations and fears....a demon possessed, naked man! The man was clearly out of his mind – and they assumed he was violent. Possibly as the disciples huddled there on the shore said to one another “What else did you expect? Isn't this what Gentiles are like?”

Which leads me to wonder what our hidden expectations are? What are we expecting to find when we travel to unknown territory and meet strangers who are not like us. What stereotypes are we carrying – consciously or unconsciously – and how do these stereotypes skew our

expectations and make us suspicious of people with accents or people of color or people with strange clothing?

Our story continues as Jesus commands the demons to depart. With the demons gone (Jesus won that battle) what we find underneath is a man – calm – at peace – in his right mind and sitting at the feet of Jesus – which is always the sign of a new believer. In the presence of Jesus, this man and this situation went from chaos to calm. Both have been transformed!

Now, here's the important part: notice that Jesus never asks this man to become a Jew. Jesus gave him back his life, but did not expect that this transformation would lead him to become a Jew and follow the path of the law. Jesus did not talk about circumcision or food purity or offerings to be made at the temple back home.

Jesus sent him back to his own village to witness to his neighbors about his transformation through Jesus. Jesus did not expect this man to become a Jew just like him, but to live his life as who he was at his core: a child of God – beloved – and uniquely himself.

I wonder whether when we hear this story are we able to see the man at the heart of the drama? Are we able to recognize the child of God under the other trappings? When Jesus freed the man in chains, he also freed all the other witnesses as well: disciples, villagers, and you and me. Jesus freed us to see this anonymous man in his full humanity – transformed by the presence of the love of God in Jesus. Just like us. For 2000 years Jesus has been at work everywhere and in every person, including those who 'live on the other side.'

The apostle Paul wrestles with a similar dilemma in our reading from Galatians. Through the Galatian community, strange folk with some distasteful customs have come to believe in Jesus, but once they believe they're expected to turn into law-abiding Jews. They must follow the law; not just 10 of the commandments, but all 613 of them.

By doing this, the Galatians have made the Law critical to believers' salvation. Now the Law is many things and can be a source of wisdom but it is not our salvation, That is the work of Jesus.

You and I are not transformed by Law but by Christ who works in us and through us. Our unity and our life is not in doctrines and rituals, nor in practices and customs but in the crucified and risen Christ, in the love of the Creator God for us – and only that.

Or as Paul wrote it “In Christ we are neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female.”

These two stories challenge us to consider where we too might be Galatians. Once a person has turned to Jesus, do we see a need for them to conform to 'so called' Christian norms: in speech, in dress, in relationships? Although we profess Christ as necessary for our salvation –

Do we carry all kinds of expectations which lead to all kinds of judgment about all the other stuff like

Acolytes wearing sneakers

Pastors wearing earrings

Young children taking communion

Divorced people re-marrying

People with purple hair

Unmarried folks living together

And people who love the wrong people

These judgments set up barriers for others and hold us captive just as the chains held the Gerasene man. Our judgments are intended to shape others into our image instead of allowing God to be at work transforming each of us into the image of God in which we were created.

Jesus spent his ministry calling all people to himself – offering them new life and the Church of Jesus should mirror that new creation by being a place where we are all being transformed by the Spirit into a community filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness and self-control. But not necessarily filled with people who look like us.

So I ask: What judgments are we carrying in our hearts which prove to keep others from knowing the love of God? How do these judgments cripple us in our faith journey?

We do not all have to agree with each other, we do not all have to behave or look like each other. None of that is important.

It is Jesus alone who is critical...for in Christ alone is our salvation.