



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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Scripture Without Borders

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 23, 2013

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Luke 8:26-39

Yesterday in an article about our Presiding Bishop, the religion writer for the *Times*, Mark Oppenheimer, described the Episcopal Church as "troubled and shrinking." First I sighed and then I yawned. Of course, some Episcopal churches are shrinking, many doing so as part of the larger and continuing movement from rural to urban life and perhaps more significantly as evidence of a deepening secularization of our culture. But many are not shrinking, and for a good number of them the growth that is being experienced represents an important swing toward a more sustainable kind of modern theology about which I shall say a bit more in a moment. As to the churches' being troubled, another way of putting that is to admit that we are not all of one mind. In a world as complex as ours, though oneness is always a sentimental favorite in the church, its reality, should it be possible outside our imagination, could suggest mindlessness and myopia that are much worse than troubled.

The point of the article was to discuss a sermon given by Bishop Jefferts Schori in a remote part of her cure, an island off the coast of Venezuela. (Yes, The Episcopal Church has a few South American dioceses). Her text was a passage from the book of Acts with a story somewhat similar to our gospel today: a young slave girl, who was possessed by a powerful gift of divination (fortunetelling in shorthand), became an irritant to Paul, a well documented curmudgeon, who by divine power of his own in the name of Jesus either exorcized a demon from the young woman or robbed her of a remarkable and profitable gift—depending upon whom you asked. Bishop Katherine's sermon provocatively asks her hearers to consider Paul's action as less a God-inspired miracle than a petulant act on his part to quiet a beautiful young woman who was also bearing witness to the power of God.

As they are wont to do, the conservative religious blogosphere leapt into full frontal assault and have yet to slow down, despite the fact that the Presiding Bishop's remarks are far from shocking. In fact, her engagement with the scripture in this way—viewing it as capable of ongoing revelation and openness—is not only a hallmark of Anglican biblical scholarship but also a fresh example of how God's word *may* be speaking to us in new and life-giving ways.

I am yammering on about this because the only hope for scripture to remain—or more truthfully, regain—authority and meaning in our lives is for it to be engaged as a current and organic source of help and inspiration, not as a relic of antiquity worthy of something akin to worship. If these ancient stories with which we must contend and from which we claim and hope to receive great insight each week are truly to speak to us, we must free ourselves from the perception of many and the absolute assertion of others that there is only one right meaning of any piece of scripture. If that were true, then with some mixture of effort and study, we could determine and contain the meaning of each piece of scripture and live happily, even if somewhat boringly, ever after. But it is not true: deep and deeper, new and newer truth continues to be derived from this living, complex collection of scripture, which speaks to us even today in ways its writers could never imagine, a truth about scripture that for me defines it as inspired.

Although today's story seems fairly direct at first, simply another old account of a miraculous healing, if we could ever describe such an event as simple, we learn quickly that it is much more than that. It involves a story of a tormented Gentile who hangs out in cemeteries near a herd of pigs. Immediately the reader or listener sits up and takes notice: this is not an ordinary Jewish tale. Gentiles, the dead and swine are remarkably and famously unclean for devout Jews. Naming the disturbed man "Legion," often erroneously thought to reflect the preponderance of demons in him, was in fact to employ another connotation of the word.

Rome's notorious army was often called Legion. And so with just that amount of historical contextualizing, we can see that this story of what might appear to be an account of individual salvation actually bears heavy overtones of revolution and liberation. The despised Romans would not in the end rule the day, the story suggests, and even more astonishingly this good news was not just for Jews but for Gentiles as well.

Interesting enough, I hope; but what on earth does this story, filled with historical specificity and intent, have to say to us? Or more to the point, why do we care about it in our context? Our view of God's people is obviously much wider than that of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries—not as wide as we like to claim it to be, but we certainly comprehend the wideness of God's love and rarely think about those who are in and those who are out. Right? Our understanding of mental illness is much broader than that held in the first century—we rarely speak of demons in a serious sense anymore. We speak of schizophrenia and other mental illnesses, which we almost fully understand and which we always successfully treat with drugs—except when we don't or when the poor soul can't afford them. There is certainly no stigma about mental illness in our culture. Right? And we are not really in need of liberation, living freely as we do, unencumbered by systems or forces that govern our lives or hold us hostage to shackles that we'd like to break. That occasional sense—well, maybe it is a bit more often than occasional—of being on a wheel of fortune from which there seems to be no easy exit only occurs because we are momentarily tired. Right?

Hmmm. Well, on second thought, maybe this story is not so distant as it seemed. In fact, it could be my story, and my guess is that it could be yours. It is amazing how prescribed and small our lives can sometimes become in this huge, sophisticated city, amazing that in a city of such celebrated diversity we can go for days without meaningful interaction with others outside our group, our tribe. Maybe we are not so open as we think we are. As for the demons, well, except for the chocolate demon that sometimes overtakes me late in the afternoon or the peanut butter one that invades my life fairly regularly in the middle of the night, except for those two which are relatively innocuous, I don't admit to having many demons. But again on further thought, refusal to admit them doesn't mean they don't exist.

I have felt on occasion the desperation of this poor man, so vividly described in Luke's passage. "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." I have had the demons of worry and anxiety, of depression and fear, have been in fact seized by them on occasion in the dark of the night when no amount of prayer or straight talk seemed to make much difference. Some of you have confessed similar moments in your own lives. From my angle these "demons" appear to be widely experienced in the human condition.

I also have experienced the feeling that the liberation, which I believe so strongly to be part of the Christian story, is more talk than it is delivery, wondering at moments along the way if this time I had so completely boxed myself in that there was indeed no way out. How, I pondered, could good intentions have gone so terribly wrong; and again my guess is that these moments are not unique to me, the truth of them living in the nature of us all.

So, yes, it seems that an old, old story, which can be interrupted in so many ways, none of which earn the right to be called ultimate, sheds a bit of light and a ray of hope on my life and on yours. When with prayer and imagination we have the courage to unlock scripture, the old becomes new again and we realize that the story is not yet over. Our despairs, our otherness, our anxieties, our capacities to be transformed—all held in the loving embrace of Christ. The Good News through the mystery of Christ is not past but alive today in our hearts.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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