

Problem: What guidance do these scripture texts have for us in light of the tragic shooting in Orlando?

-During this last week I have noticed an extra “heaviness” that people are carrying. In response to a shooting that happened exactly one week ago when a gunman entered a gay nightclub and killed 49 people injuring many more, a lot of us seem to be struggling with an overwhelming sense of frustration, fear, and anger. “Where does this stop?” asked one Lutheran pastor at a community meeting I attended this last week.

-I was watching the news a couple days ago and a segment came on titled “What to Do if You are in a Mass Shooting.” The news anchors proceeded in asking an “expert” who gave 6 pointers and who especially argued that this is something our children should learn by heart. So now I guess we are at the point where surviving an incident when an armed person or persons wanting to shoot and kill you is roughly on the same level as “stop, drop, and roll” fire safety.

-No wonder people have felt “heavy” this week. It’s overwhelming and hard to know what to do. How do we as people of faith respond to such a tragic, hate-filled act? Where do we turn?

-As Lutherans, we talk a lot about “the living Word” but maybe struggle to grasp at exactly what that means. In light of tragedies such as Orlando, I think a Living Word is absolutely crucial. A Living Word keeps relevant and renews itself in ways we can’t imagine. A Living Word doesn’t stop with words on a page, but breaks into our hearts and minds in order to give some guidance when we have lost the way.

-So, how can our scripture readings today become Living Word to us who maybe have heavy hearts?

Solution: We pay a lot of attention to the man possessed in the gospel story and little attention to his community also being “possessed” by the status quo.

-Our Gospel story of Jesus healing the possessed Gerasene and casting the evil spirits into the pigs who throw themselves into the water is one that we have maybe heard before. Most commentators focus on the possessed man who is overtaken by these voices. “Legion” as the possessed man calls himself literally means “a multitude” which points directly to the fact of him losing his self, his identity, within the throng of voices that dwell in him. Perhaps we then can see ourselves in this man and his “multitude of voices”.

-But, what makes this scripture “living” for me this week is not Jesus healing the man, but the village response to the man’s healing. “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.” (verse 35)

-This is really strange if you think about it. Here was a man who couldn’t be contained, even with guards and chains and who roamed about the wild like a madman who was

now “of right mind.” He was now healed by the grace of God.....and people were afraid. They even asked Jesus to leave, to get out! Where’s the celebration? Where’s the welcoming back? Where’s the hallelujahs? There were none in this community. Why? -I think it is because their world was disrupted. The order of their community was turned on it’s head, and they couldn’t figure out how to deal with it. While the people of the village were unable either to cure or to contain the demon-possessed man, the villagers at least were accustomed to him. They knew their place and his place. For years they probably gained solace in calling him “crazy”, “sinful”, and “no longer part of their community”. Jesus does what Jesus does best and radically disrupts this paradigm. “Blessed are those who are the outcast, for theirs is the Kingdom of God.” Even when shown a more just and better way of healing, the village people ask Jesus to leave because they are afraid of change.

-Could this be us too? For we know our place in these gun tragedies. We go to vigils and pray that this won’t happen again. Politicians make speeches of condolence. We might cry out in anger and feel depressed for a while. This is what has happened time and time again. We are used to our place and the man being out in the wild. But, how do we respond when someone tries to do something? How does our society respond when there is a national or local push for background checks, better gun safety, or regulation on military grade assault weapons that are designed solely not for hunting elk in the mountains of Montana but for killing people. How do we respond when there is a push for better protections against hate crimes for our LGBTQ and Muslim brothers and sisters? So far there has been fear that the social order will be disrupted.

- “Odd as it may sound, we often prefer the devil we know to the freedom we do not.”
(David Lose)

Implication: Perhaps what the people of the village needed was not another demonstration of Jesus’ power, but a living testimony of one who has been healed and restored.

-Here is where this text gets interesting again. After Jesus leaves, the healed man comes back and essentially asks to be one of Jesus’ disciples. Instead of the usual “follow me” response we would expect, Jesus says something quite different: “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” What Jesus is doing is bequeathing the responsibility and the authority to effect communal change to those in the community who have felt Jesus’ presence and power. Perhaps what these people need is not another demonstration of Jesus’ power but the living testimony of the one who has been healed and restored. Jesus is allowing the people affected by God’s love to do the work.

-I think what this “Living Word” is saying to us today is: Is our community the one that can be Christ and heal others who are possessed? Is our community a community that

can be Christ and tell of a God who radically brings healing and restoration in the presence of so much hate.

-I had a deep and meaningful conversation with a member of our church who has had a someone from their family killed by rage-filled gun violence. As we continued to talk and I heard this member's struggle for how to move forward, they said to me: "The only way I know how to respond to this act is to lose myself in helping others." I find this statement inspiring and feel that this can be our call: to "go home and to tell others about losing ourselves in what God has done for us." For our community, like the possessed man being healed, has also been healed in so many ways. For when we lose ourselves, we can then speak out against hate and prejudice against certain groups of people. We can actively model a life that powerfully says "NO!" to gun violence. We can help heal others and make sure they don't do unthinkable acts like killing other people.

- We have been given the power to be Christ, to lose ourselves and move our greater communities (the world) out of the current muck of hate, bigotry, and apathy into a world of healing, respect, and nonviolence.

-For when we are Christ in the world, things happen. No wonder why Paul wrote his famous verse from Galatians which appears in our reading today too: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28)

-For us and for our world torn apart by gun violence: may it be so. Amen.