

*That Time Jesus Wrecked an Economy to Heal One Person*

A sermon preached at Community Church of Sebastopol

Rev. Rachel Knuth, June 19, 2022

Year C: 2nd Sunday after Pentecost, Luke 8:26-39

Juneteenth just became a national holiday last year. It's set aside as a time to acknowledge that, despite President Lincoln signing the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, enslaved Black people were kept from knowing that freedom had come to them—especially in parts of Louisiana and Texas. It took about 2.5 years for enslaved people in the deep south to finally get word that they had been declared free by the government. Bishop Yvette Flunder, founder of City of Refuge UCC in Oakland, wonders, “How do you keep a slave a slave when freedom has come? You make them believe it is God’s will for them. Freedom does not apply to you— it is God’s will for you to be a slave. And you keep them from knowing freedom has come.” So, Juneteenth is when we celebrate that freedom is for all people. It’s a celebration of breaking silence. It’s about the good news of liberation for all— and maybe especially for those who might have been told it’s not possible. In light of Juneteenth, in light of this day when we celebrate freedom and the breaking of silence, I wonder how we might hear a word of liberation in our scripture?

That’s a hard question, because this is a pretty challenging Bible story, with a wild man in chains and demons and pigs that stampede to their drowning death. What is even happening here?

The story begins with Jesus traveling across the lake and encountering a man who is possessed by demons. This man is excluded from the city—we’re not sure if he’s dangerous or just wild— but we do know from the text that he keeps breaking the chains that the community puts him in. He is naked and lives in the tombs, which means he is very much an outcast. He begs Jesus, he says, “What have you to do with me? Do not torment me!”-- and we’re left to wonder— is it the man speaking, or the demons? It’s not clear if the man is even aware where his own identity ends, and possession begins.

When Jesus asks the humanizing question, What is your name, the man replies “Legion”-- he can’t even remember his own name. His mind is “occupied” like the Roman army that occupies the region of Gerasa. And to heal the man, Jesus permits “Legion” to enter a herd of pigs, who then stampede themselves down into the lake and drown. The pig farmers rush off to the city to tell everyone (I bet they did, they just watched their livelihoods--and by that I mean their economy-- go literally down the drain). And then the people see the man clothed, sitting with Jesus just like a disciple, and in his right mind. All the people are afraid, so they ask Jesus to leave. When the healed man wants to go with him, Jesus tells him to stay. He tells the healed man to return home and proclaim the good news of what God has done for him.

The root of the word “economy” is *oikos*, which means “home.” At church we use the word ‘community’ a lot but ‘economy’ is important because it’s about how the whole house, the whole family or community’s resources are shared. Really, economy is about justice. When Jesus first encounters the demon-possessed man, he has no *oikos*, no home, and he lives among the tombs. And if we expand our view a bit, we can see that there is a larger economy in this man’s situation. What I mean by that is, that it’s possible this man’s demons are accentuated by the whole ecosystem of the community itself.

And how do people break free from the demons that possess us? How do we find healing for our selves and our community, and create a just and liberating *oikos*, or “economy,” for all? First I think we start where Jesus and the man begin-- with naming the demons themselves. The demons could be many things-- but this Juneteenth Day I want to name the system of racism which has been present since the founding of our country, and which has existed with a legion of names, including enslavement, Jim Crow, sharecropping, separate but equal, redistricting and voter suppression. Then if we follow Jesus’ lead, Jesus gives permission for the demons to enter the swine on a nearby hill. Luke’s audience would have heard the demon named “Legion” going into “pigs” in a highly ironic way. What they would have heard was Jesus expelling Rome and drowning Roman rule. They would have been awestruck at one person who has the

authority to restore human beings to the wholeness of life, one person who could command the occupying oppressors and defeat them. What I hear in this is hope, hope that one person can make a difference in the face of injustice.

Jesus finds the way to the man's real self. He fully restores him as a human being. In fact, Jesus wrecks an entire economy, sending the town's pigs stampeding into the sea, and in the process creates 'home' for this man. Jesus has the man stay in the community to provide a witness to liberation and healing, to remind the community again and again that it's possible to be seen and loved for being our true selves. To remind them that if someone as deeply troubled as he was can find healing, then maybe they can too. And I imagine that as a fully healed person, he stops accepting the blame they dump on him. I like to imagine him going through the rest of his life filled with the strength of being seen in his full humanity, a beloved child of God.

This week six youth and two adult volunteers traveled to Paradise, California to help with rebuilding from the Camp Fire in 2018. Thank you to Kathy Matthies for being a great co-leader, and to Bobbie Johanson for stepping in at the last minute to help. We had a good week. We watched the Warriors win on Thursday night. I want to tell you that our group enjoyed each other and represented our congregation well in the community. And the town of Paradise is an interesting place. Talk about a town learning again how to create "home" after tragedy. Talk about an economy struggling from disaster.

There are many stories I hope you'll get to hear from our Youth, but I'd like to share just one with you this morning. It was our first day on a job site, and on our way through town, our group had noticed the plethora of American flags, sprinkled with yellow "Don't Tread on Me" flags. We were not in Sebastopol any more. Some of our young people were worried for their own safety, worried that their humanity might not be recognized. None of us were sure what the homeowner would be like— would he be bigoted and would we have to learn how to be kind to a suffering person no matter how his views might differ from ours? That was seeming like a tall order. There was definitely anxiety

brewing in the group. But as we walked onto the deck that we would spend the next few days staying, out came Phil Foto. He had dog tags on from his service in Vietnam, and a hat with camo. He welcomed us to his home, and thanked us for coming. I could tell there were wary feelings in the group. Phil Foto invited us inside his home, where he showed us the few items he was able to save from the fire— old photographs of him playing in a military band— pictured with VP Hubert Humphrey, the President of South Korea, and others. On his wall was his collection of concert t-shirts, including bands we knew, like Kiss, Pink Floyd, and Ozzy Osbourne. Our group was starting to warm up to Phil Foto. He showed us his 1960 yearbook, and where one of his famous school-mates had signed it— a person named Steve Martin.

And then it happened. He described how he helped put on the Pink Floyd concert at the Berlin Wall, and he said, “I don’t believe in walls— I tear them down.” And then he handed our young people actual pieces of the Berlin Wall, two small chunks. He said, “I like to build bridges wherever I go.”

The Holy Spirit moved that day. And isn’t that why we go on trips like this, to get out of our comfort zones, encounter difference, and be transformed through acts of service? In that moment, Phil Foto made a difference in our lives. Our youth saw his humanity, and he saw theirs.

That’s how people ultimately get set free— through seeing each other’s full humanity. Jesus wants the demon-possessed man to stay where he is as a witness to the fact that it’s possible to be fully who you are, in your own home, without losing your sense of self and without requiring others to give up who they are.

So now our youth and adult leaders have come home— home to this economy, to the advantages and disadvantages our own community has to offer. But because they come home different, having witnessed and experienced all that they shared in Paradise, all of us are changed. Thank you for going to Paradise, and thank you for coming home.

This Juneteenth let us remember that one person can make a difference in the world. Opal Lee, known as the grandmother of Juneteenth, basically made this holiday happen for our country. At the age of 94, she walked from Fort Worth, Texas to Washington, DC, to advocate for Juneteenth becoming a national holiday. She walked 2.5 miles per day, as a symbol of the 2.5 years it took for the Emancipation Proclamation to reach the enslaved people of the deep south. Along the way she built up a movement that could not be ignored. She says she's "just a little old lady in tennis shoes getting in everybody's business" but she is the reason President Biden signed this day into law in June 2021.

One person can make a difference for healing in the whole house, in the whole economy of life— whether it's the man healed by Jesus, or Phil, or Opal, or you, or me. And when we act on the side of healing, we are following the way of Jesus Christ. Amen.