

Sermon preached by the Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 2nd Sunday after Pentecost, June 23, 2019.

Here's the moral from today's gospel (**Luke 8:27-39**): "Don't be a large herd of swine on a hillside when Jesus is considering healing a man with many demons." You never know where those demons will end up.

This passage is dramatic, to say the least. Jesus meets a man with severe mental illness that manifests itself physically. The man begs Jesus not to get involved. But, why? Well, the man is very clear about this. His demons don't like change.

Think about it. If you were a demon, and had a choice between inhabiting a human or swine, you'd pick the human. So, the demons put up a fight, exactly what the man feared. "I beg you, Jesus, do not torment me with your healing."

But Jesus knows better. He goes ahead and heals. He knows that the man will be better off. And, so he was. The demons leave and enter the swine, who in turn run over the cliff and drown. Really bad for the swine. Really good, as it turns out, for the healed man, who expresses his thanks to Jesus by "proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him."

You would think that when others heard about this turn of events, they would welcome Jesus to their side of the lake. But no, when the people saw the improved condition of the man, whom they knew very well, the people were afraid. Some were even angry, like the owner of the swine.

But, of what would people be afraid? Perhaps they were afraid of power not under their control. Jesus, you see, had power. He could make things happen that otherwise wouldn't happen. His power could over-ride the power of others. And, even if his power turned bad things into good things, people might resist. Why? Because they would be sharing control.

We know something about this condition. The generous description is "control issues." The least flattering description is "control freak." Sometimes we want others to be in charge. But other times we want to be in charge.

In this morning's Old Testament passage (**Isaiah 65:1-9**) Isaiah was trying to help a "rebellious people." "Here I am," he says to a nation that did not call on his name." Isaiah just wanted to help, but the response of the people he was trying to help was "Keep to yourself, do not come near, for I am too holy for you." Isaiah thought that he was "too holy" for them. They thought that they were "too holy" for Isaiah. Fortunately for both Isaiah and the people, God stepped in: "So I will do for my servants' sake, and not destroy them all."

A good outcome, but it took some work. What kind of work? Power-sharing work. This is the subject of this morning's lesson from Galatians (**Galatians 3:23-29**). "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." A shorter version is "We're all in the same boat."

And it's a boat that will capsize unless God intervenes, unless God uses Divine Power to rescue. And how does God do this? What weapon does God use? What kind of power does God exercise?

Amazingly, God exercises the Power of the Crucifixion, followed by the Power of the Resurrection. God's arsenal has no bounds, yet God chooses a sacrificial death and a miraculous new life to save the boat that we are all in. In Christ, the boat does not capsize. We are rescued. We are thrown a life-line.

The challenge now is to take hold of that life-line. Its purpose is to save. Jesus can initiate this exchange, but it's up to us to complete the exchange, to take hold of the life-line. If we say "No thanks," for whatever reason, a wonderful opportunity will be lost. What a shame for us.

But all is not lost. Fortunately, one of the great attributes of the life-line of the Risen Christ is that it is always available. It never loses its power. And you and I never lose the option to grab that life-line.

This dance between God's gift and our reception of the gift is really a Power Dance. Offering the gift doesn't happen casually. God works at this gift. God's Son dies delivering this gift. And, as we know full well, receiving the gift doesn't happen casually. We work hard on our end of the relationship. The Giver

exercises power, and the receivers – little old you and me - exercise our own power. The power of “yes,” or the power of “not now.”

It’s an uneven experience, this Dance. Sometimes, like the man possessed in today’s gospel, we beg Jesus, “Do not torment me.” Other times, we echo today’s psalm (**Psalm 22:18-27**): “The poor shall eat and be satisfied, and those who seek the Lord shall praise him.”

One of the remarkable characteristics of God’s love for us is that God doesn’t force His love on us. God delivers that love in all sorts of ways - chiefly, we believe in His Son Jesus – but we are free to say “Yes” or “No,” or “Can I have some more time, please?”

Staying with the Dance theme, God asks, “May I have this dance, please?” He doesn’t yank us out onto the dance floor. He doesn’t say to us, “You’ve got to ask me first.” God creates the setting, including the freedom to accept or decline, and then waits eagerly for our response. And, if we are not ready at the first request, God gives us more time. But He will be back and ask again, always politely, of course, but also always eager for a positive response.

Our final hymn today is “Lord of the Dance.” It’s a wonderful hymn, with comforting words set to the Shaker tune of “Simple Gifts.” Here is our key phrase for the day. It’s from the last stanza: “I’ll live in you if you’ll live in me.” “If” is the key word. It’s up to us. God can and does offer. Indeed God is living with us right now.

If we respond with “I don’t think so” or “I’m not ready” or even “I beg you, do not torment me,” we don’t negate the invitation. That invitation is a standing one; it doesn’t depend on us. What depends on us is whether we say “Thank you, I’d love to have this dance.”

And, again, we can say this at any time, and God will be pleased. What an amazing and generous attitude and gift. And it’s ours for the receiving. Why would we or anyone else decline such an offer? At a minimum, it’s worth a conversation with the Lord and others at the dance and, perhaps most important, those outside the hall. Amen.

