

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**  
*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on June 19, 2016 (Proper 7, Year C)*

Whenever we hear stories about Jesus driving out demons, we never quite know what to do with them. We tend to rationalize the demonic. “You know, they weren’t able to diagnose mental disorders back then.” Or, “That was a more superstitious time; this so-called demon possession is nothing a few doses of lithium wouldn’t cure.” Or we relegate the demonic to the realm of fantasy. We think of *The Exorcist* — priests mumbling Latin incantations, holding up giant crosses, and sprinkling holy water. Which turns the whole notion of driving out demons into a Hollywood farce.

But mostly we don’t know how to define the demonic. Is it a malevolent paranormal being like something out of *Ghostbusters* or an unclean spirit or simply a metaphor for evil? In some ways it doesn’t really matter, as long as we recognize a demon as anything that keeps us from wholeness. A force that subverts the wholeness of our humanity and serves as an obstacle to becoming the person God intends us to be. Something that prevent us from experiencing the fullness of the human condition by distorting our relationships with God, with one another, and with ourselves.

But we dismiss the demonic at our peril. Because while we have made great strides in psychiatric care, and exorcism isn’t part of my *everyday* theological tool kit, we certainly haven’t made much progress in eradicating evil. And that’s really what’s at the root of these Scriptural stories of demonic possession. Suffice it to say that evil is alive, well, and thriving in our world. The events that took place at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando one week ago are a bloody reminder that demons do indeed still exist.

Which makes this morning’s gospel passage about Jesus’ encounter with the Gerasene demoniac absolutely relevant to our everyday lives. We meet a wild, unkempt, demon-possessed man in a story that is both striking and bizarre. He’s been tormented for years and has terrorized the local population with his erratic behavior. Shunned by his family and community, he is left out in the tombs, chained up like an animal. It’s not that his family want to harm him but they literally have no idea what to do with him. He’s become a menace to society and a danger to himself.

This is the man Jesus meets as he and the disciples disembark from their journey across the sea into Gentile territory. Actually he doesn’t really meet the man as much as he meets the demons. But he sees the humanity trapped within; he sees the man held hostage by his demons. He knows that deep within this outward horror is a creature made in God’s image. A man literally and figuratively being held in bondage by his demons.

It’s impossible to know what goes on in the mind of a killer. It’s been speculated that Omar Mateen was a troubled soul; plagued with self-doubt and questions of identity; radicalized, tormented by his own demons. Somewhere in that tortured soul was a human being; but the demons were not exorcized; the humanity was unable to break through the demonic. And 50 people, including Mateen, are dead.

It’s interesting that whenever Jesus encounters a person described as possessed, the demons themselves never fail to recognize him. It’s as if the mere presence of Jesus makes them nervous. They cry out, “What do you want with us? Leave us alone!” For all those who don’t recognize Jesus for who he is —

the establishment, the religious elite, the respectable — the demons do. The demons get it. The demons understand that Jesus opposes their very existence and seeks to drive them out. In this story they cry out, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?”

And this speaks to the profound truth that the great counterbalance to evil is love. Jesus knows this; the demons themselves know this. And deep down, we too, know this. Even if we don’t always act as if we do.

What happened in Orlando was evil, demonic. There is no doubt about that. The slaughter of 49 innocent people is the height of an evil act by a demon-possessed man. But besides the evil act itself we see that a single demonic act can unleash a legion of demons. In the aftermath of horror we have seen the demonization of those who differ from us. The demonization of Muslims; the demonization of the LGBTQ community; the demonization specifically of Latino gay men. The demonization of those who differ from us physically, racially, sexually, religiously. And this demonization has come from places and people that should be held to higher standards — our religious leaders, our elected officials, our politicians.

And yet, as followers of Jesus, we know the demons Jesus fought so actively and tirelessly to drive out: the demons of discrimination and fear and hatred and violence. Which means that until the world is a safe place for gay men and women who want to dance; until the world is a safe place for an African-American man to cross the street; until the world is a safe place for women to walk through a parking garage at night; until the world is safe for young girls to avoid being sexually exploited; our work is not complete. The reign of God that Jesus ushers into our world as the in-breaking of God’s kingdom is not realized.

We live in a sinful and broken world. Which is why the Christian witness is more important now than ever before. Your presence here this morning adds your voice to this witness; it helps proclaim to the world that the demons don’t win. That the demons don’t get the last word. Jesus does. And he drives them out not by fighting fire with fire; not in a hail of bullets; but with love and compassion and hope. By speaking the word and naming the demons.

That’s our charge as well. To stand up, to make our voices heard, and to name the demons. We Christians must stand up and speak against those who would use our faith as a means to oppress others; we Christians must stand up and speak against those who kindle anger against Muslims because of the actions of a few extremists. We Christians must stand up and speak for peace in a nation which has become numb to violence.

On Tuesday night many of you gathered along with other members of the community for a Vigil for Orlando at Old Ship Church. It wasn’t the words or the music that mattered but our collective voices standing up to the demons in our midst. We can make a difference. Your voice matters. The temptation to demonize those who differ from us is yet another demon in our midst that needs exorcizing. If demons encourage our participation with the forces that seek to destroy the creatures of God, then all we can do is invite Jesus to be among us to drive them out.

Faith, hope, and love. These three. That’s what Jesus brought to the Gerasene demoniac. And it’s what he seeks to bring to the entire world. Until this becomes a reality, our work as a Christian community is not done.