

Out of Our Place?

June 23, 2019 | Emmanuel Church, Geneva | Second Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Luke 8:26; “Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee.”

You have no idea how much I have been looking forward to this day. Of course it is wonderful to be in Geneva—but that isn’t why. And it is a blessing to be for the first time in Emmanuel Church, this place of such history in the Convocation, and the host of this year’s convention—but please don’t be hurt when I tell you, that isn’t why, either.

No, I have been looking forward to today since about January first, because by being here today we have you and I have both finally made it back into that blessed season in the life of the church known as Ordinary Time. For about six straight months now, life has seemed like one accelerating roller-coaster of planning, packing, moving, losing, organizing, disorganizing, shedding, farewelling, helloing, and oh, yes, celebrating.

It’s all good, and it’s all exhausting. And now, after all of that—after a Lent spent giving up one life for another, after an Easter season spent learning how to carry all my vestments around all the time, after a Pentecost spent confirming people in our cathedral and a Trinity Sunday dodging the Vespas in Florence that swarm like locusts, I am in Geneva, at Emmanuel Church, which has had a big circle drawn around it on my calendar like a finish line. Ordinary Time! Ordinary Time. Thank God Almighty, we are finally in Ordinary Time.

But wouldn’t you just know it—we can’t rest here. Just as we have arrived in Ordinary Time, Jesus has gone on before us to what is no ordinary place. And what he is doing there is no ordinary thing.

The Gospel reading this morning presents us with the disturbing account of Jesus’ encounter with the Gerasene demoniac. It is a story that appears, in some form or another, in all three of the synoptic gospels.

There is a little bit of variation in how each of the authors tells the story, but the core elements are consistent: There is a man possessed by evil spirits. They have taken such violent control over his life that he is a danger to himself and to the community. The community fears him—even hates him—and shuts him out, casting him out into the wilderness.

And perhaps most important of all, the place where this is all happening—a place to the east and south of the Sea of Galilee—is a place where Jesus does not belong. It is not a place where any self-respecting Jew should be. It is a land beyond the pale, a land of Gentiles, an unclean land. It is, in fact, opposite Galilee—opposite to, opposed to, the place where the Jewish people know themselves to belong. It is so much not their place that one of the ways people make their living there is by raising pigs.

Now, you are a learned congregation, so you already know this story well enough to know that in the long history of the Christian tradition it has been a rich source of theological reflection. The great modern theologian René Girard saw in this story an archetype of the scapegoat narrative, the core human flaw that forges the nexus

between religion and violence; and Girard saw in the way that Christ breaks into the story a uniquely Christian answer to the question of how to break the cycle of scapegoating, violence, and sacrifice.

That by itself would make a good sermon, but it is not this sermon.

And you probably know enough about how this story fits into the narrative of Luke's two-volume gospel to know that Luke sets this story into a sequence of stories to show with increasing force the things that Jesus has power over.

First, he forgives the sins of the woman who anoints his feet; he has power to forgive sins.

Then, he calms the storm; he has power over nature.

Here, he exorcises demons; he has power over Satan and all his forces.

And finally, at the very end of the eighth chapter of Luke, the leader of the synagogue will watch as Jesus raises his daughter from the dead. Jesus has power even over death.

All of that *before* the ninth chapter, where Jesus gathers the disciples and sends them out, giving them "power and authority over all demons, and to cure diseases." Do you get it? What comes before is meant to give us a preview into what disciples do—or at least, what they are meant to do.

But it also is meant to teach us *where* disciples do these things. Not in safe places. Not in the secure confines of our own church. At dinner parties, and in the homes of the powerful, and most of all in places where we do not belong. Places where no decent Christian should go.

Disciples are meant to go where we are out of place. We are meant to be in dangerous places. We are meant to be in places that will risk our reputation.

All of which comes naturally to Episcopalians, right? Yeah, right.

One of my wisest mentors sat me down when I was applying to be considered for ordination and told me, with no smile on his face—"The ministry will take you places you never thought you'd go." Boy, has that ever turned out to be true.

And I don't mean Geneva, or not just Geneva. I've been in hospitals and hospices.

I've been at conferences with the Secretary of State, and at the deathbeds of people with no family and no fame.

I've been in prisons and in palaces, in temples and in mosques, in gurdwardas and in synagogues. And the one and only time I've been in the back seat of a police car, I was wearing my collar. The ministry will take you places you never thought you'd go.

And you, dear friends—every one of you—every one of us—we are all ministers.

So we had better be ready. Because if we are willing to risk putting away our ambitions and our reputations, if we can find the way to set aside our righteous certainties and give up theologizing our cultural preferences, if we can do all that and simply follow where Christ goes—then we will end up out of our place, in places we don't belong, doing the work that disciples do: the work of compassion, the work of forgiveness, the work of creation care, the work of bringing back to life the things that appear to be dead all around us.

You will end up going into the sorts of places that make people wonder about your judgment, or your reputation. Places where decent people don't go. You may end up being among the homeless or the incarcerated. You may end up being among the mentally ill. You may end up being among refugees and asylum seekers.

You may end up being among *Texans*—like Josh and Jane.

And the same thing will happen when we make ourselves a place of welcome for the outcast and the ostracized. The same thing will happen the more progress we make in building the sort of church Paul is teaching those Galatians to make—a church with no divisions about race or class or gender or anything else. If we do that, we will be acting counterculturally. If we do that, we will be seen as violating the norms. If we do that, we will be seen as dangerous—or worse.

In the church in the United States, it took a very long time for the Episcopal Church to make itself a place of welcome for people of color—and when it did, there were people who turned against us.

The same thing is happening now that we are making our church a place of welcome for gay and lesbian and transgendered people. Those are the places we are not supposed to go. They are the region of the Gerasenes.

But we go there.

Now, lest you think this has a happy ending, lest you think disciples receive a lot of social approval and civic honor for doing what we are called to do, remember how the story ends. The man gets healed—the man who was outcast, who was reviled, who was made the bearer of all the torment and trouble of that community, *he* is thankful.

But everyone else—they want Jesus out of there, and fast. It's just one more place where there is no room for him in the inn. Thank you for visiting the country of the Gerasenes; please rate us on Trip Advisor, but please leave.

Just this past week, I sent a letter to an eager, enthusiastic group of Christians in Tbilisi who want to be a mission of the Episcopal Church. Tbilisi! They're not part of the world of the Reformation; they're part of the world of the Great Schism. Not only do we not have similar cultures; we don't even have similar alphabets. They are two thousand seven hundred kilometers from the nearest congregation in our Convocation. But they had written me a letter.

And do you know what? They want to be part of us. Do you know why? It's not because there is a shortage of churches on offer in Tbilisi. It's not because they saw the sermon at the Royal Wedding.

It's because they see in us a group of Christians who are willing to go where we don't belong, include people we're not supposed to include, honor partnerships we're not supposed to honor, and serve people we are not supposed to serve. Half of that community is made up of gay and lesbian people who are effectively persecuted in their own country. They see in us a group of Christians who extend themselves in love without really caring who notices. They see in us people willing to go wherever the Way of Love takes us, no matter what place it is

So just maybe we are going to Georgia. Just maybe we are going to Gerasa. Just maybe we are going to where no right-thinking, reputation-protecting person would ever go. Just maybe we are going to extraordinary places in our extraordinary time, to places where we are out of place—because that is where disciples go. *Amen.*