

Perfect Love

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First of all, this gospel has a joke in it. I don't know if you caught it. I'm not making this up: it would have been very humorous to the people of the first century church that the demons went into the swine because Jews don't eat pork. *So great! Jesus sent all the pork careening into the lake.*

I was telling Pastor Bridget that I had planned my sermon—I'd been thinking about it all week, I love this text—and then this morning in the shower, the holy spirit changed my sermon. The dilemma with that could be that I'll preach way too long because it all just occurred to me. I might have to explain it away. But I don't think that's the case.

I've been fussing with this text all week. I've been very captured by it because it is so ripe with the notions of fear. I was remembering that last week I had preached extensively about suffering, and now this week it's fear, and next week I'm gone. So, Pastor Bridget, I hope you pick up the torch and carry it.

It's a lot of fear going on in here.

First of all, I'm guessing that the disciples in the boat with Jesus might've been afraid because they were going over to gentile country; for them, it's a foreign land.

Then Jesus gets out of the boat, and he encounters the fear of this man who runs up to him, screaming and yelling.

And then there's the fear of the demons who don't want to be sent into the abyss because then they'll just disappear (although I don't see how that differs from drowning, not real clear on that). Maybe Jesus pulled the rug out from underneath them. He'll do that to you.

And then there's the fear of the people of Gerasene, and that's what kept plaguing me. *What are they so afraid of?*

Well, in first century people who were sick—who were possessed or in any way suffering—needed to be kept away from the unsick people because they feared that it was God's punishment (or *a* God, in the case of the Gentile). So you didn't want to pollute yourself by being near anybody who was ill.

This man lived in the tombs, which made him remarkably unclean—you cannot be near dead bodies, that made you even more unclean—so they were afraid of him for that reason. Given the culture of the day that kind of makes sense, but that's not what kept bothering me. The text doesn't say that they were afraid of him before nearly as much as they were afraid of him after he'd been healed. So that's curious, isn't it?

In John 1, we read that perfect love casts out fear. As I thought about that, I thought about all those occasions where perfect love in scripture and the gospels doesn't seem to cast out fear. In fact, it seems to increase it. The more loving Jesus was—eating with the outcasts, healing the sick, feeding the hungry—all those loving things that he did caused people to get more and more frightened of him.

Perfect love casts out fear—*except in the case of Jesus, who is the expression of God's absolutely perfect love.*

So I'm wondering what Luke is hoping we—his audience, his listeners—will get. Now I've read this text before, and what I always got out of it was, *well, look: Jesus can heal. What a friend we have in Jesus.*

And we heard that in the children's sermon, and it brings us a lot of solace and comfort, doesn't it? It does to me, knowing that I can say to Jesus what's in my deepest heart, and he will console and comfort me. Even if what I've revealed is a terrible disappointment—a sin that I've done—Jesus will forgive even that.

Perfect love casts out all fear.

So that's what I've usually gleaned from this story, but I thought more about it. Luke is writing to the early church, who were struggling with all kinds of things. One of the principal things that they were struggling with was that Jesus was a disruptor. He strode into situations and changed everything, and it made them mad. That's what got him killed.

Do you remember that line of the trial: *Better that one man should die rather than the whole nation suffered?*

He's a disruptor! *We have to get rid of him!* And they did.

I'm guessing that the Garasene's were unable to celebrate this man's newly found health, his newly found sanity, his newly found freedom, because it was just too disruptive. They had already decided who he was. They were comfortable with that. They were comfortable with his imprisonment. It's how things ought to be. They looked upon him as somebody unclean.

Don't change that Jesus, because then we will have to change how we view him. We might have to have him over for dinner, for God's sake. We might have to put our hand out and shake it and say, "It's so good to see how well you are."

And I'm guessing that news of fear spread through that city and county like wildfire. *Stay away from that guy!*

And they asked Jesus to leave.

It got me thinking in the shower this morning, *how often have I asked Jesus to leave, to get out, to quit disrupting my life?*

Because when I assign inferiority to somebody—anybody—I don't want that to change because I like feeling superior. I like feeling chosen and blessed.

Jesus is a disruptor.

Now, if any of you get to know me, you will recognize that I really love cleaning house. On Friday mornings, I put 1950s Rock and Roll on YouTube because I know all the words, and I turn it up loud. *Blue Moon* was on Friday, and I thought I was in a quartet in junior high school and I was the alto.

So I crank those tunes up, and I dust and vacuum and scrub the floors. Beware if you disrupt that! Do not mess with Friday mornings. Don't even come over, any of you. And I wouldn't want your help vacuuming, because there's a way to do it.

I remember when Micah our son, was really little. I don't quite do it as stringently, but I'm of the opinion that a floor needs me on my hands and knees to scrub it. No mops for me. And I was down on my hands and knees scrubbing the bathroom floor—which is not easy because those rooms are always small and you always have to adjust your position—and Micah came over and climbed on my back and said he wanted a pony ride.

Well, I got mad.

He disrupted it. That's not the way we do things here.

So I said to him, *You're not the only person in the world. Get off my back.*

And it was one of the few times in my life where I heard God speak.

I said, *Get off my back. You're not the only person in the world.*

And I heard God say, *Neither are you.*

So, what do we do with this disruptive Jesus who comes with a message of perfect love that casts out fear when we don't want the perfection in love that Jesus reveals?

To love our enemies. To do good to those who hate us. To be kind when what you really want to do is be mad or right.

Jesus disrupts that.

It's interesting because congregations have a way of getting ironclad as well. All groups do, but I spend my time—30+ years—in the culture of a congregation, and we get rigid. It's lovely that this week the disruption was you couldn't see all the words on the projector during the service. That probably made Scott crazy, but I thought it was a perfect sermon illustration, so thank you.

We have ideas about how church ought to go and be. Just like cleaning house and the right soundtrack that plays along with it in my house on Fridays. No wonder the Gerasene's got scared and asked him to leave.

So the thing that plagues me, that is gnawing at me is this: I've kind of given you the law, but what's the gospel of the Gerasenes? What's the gospel we get this morning?

Here it is: **God is relentless.**

Jesus is going to keep loving you perfectly, in the midst of your wanting to be right. In the midst of your rigidity and stubbornness, Jesus reaches out to you with that have scars in them and says, *Perfect love casts out all fear. We don't have to be afraid of change.*

It's so interesting to me that Juneteenth has been a celebration under just a small part of our culture since the 1800s, and this is the first year that our whole country has said, *Oh, huh! Maybe we could look at all of our citizens as valuable, as equal, as cherished, as beloved.* Disrupt us. God!

Every Sunday we pray, *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*, and you ought to sit down when you say that, because it's going to be a disruption. It's going to be a change of venue. I say that with a lot of energy and gusto as a preacher, but I sure don't like it when it happens to me.

Get off my back. You're not the only person in the world

But God loves me. God loves you.

God spoke to me a second time that I could audibly hear. It was in 2000, and I was on Hwy 520 heading to the church where I served, Grace Lutheran in Bellevue. I was feeling like life was just crummy, and I was thinking, *Nobody loves me.*

You ever have a day like that? Just really feeling the raw edge of that?

All of a sudden, the clouds broke, and the sun came through, and God said, *You will always be loved.*

That's a sermon all by itself.

And so we, as the body of Christ, are called to move with hope and joy towards the disruption of the perfect love that casts out fear, because we will always be loved.

Amen.