

“The Importance of Being Church”
June 20, 2010

1 Kings 19:1-15a
Luke 8:16-39

Prelude Meditation

Walking the Path of Jesus includes preserving religious freedom and the church’s ability to speak prophetically to government by resisting the commingling of church and state.

-- *Phoenix Affirmation Seven*

The man with demons “was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles.” Jesus healed him, but then “all the people of the surrounding country ... asked Jesus to leave them.”

* * *

One of the hallmarks of Progressive Christianity, as it’s described in the Phoenix Affirmations and elsewhere, is an insistence on the separation of church and state. In the U.S., most Progressive Christians have a deep respect for the First Amendment to this country’s Constitution. Most Progressive Christians are profoundly grateful that the Constitution guarantees the free exercise of religion and prohibits the establishment of government-sponsored religion.

But, when it comes to that second part of the First Amendment’s religion provisions, the Establishment Clause, something odd happens. Progressive Christians often end up focusing, not on themselves (*ourselves*), but exclusively on somebody else. When it comes to that part of the First Amendment, Progressive Christians often fall into the trap of keeping their hearts and minds (*our* hearts and minds) solely attentive to stopping those “other,” non-progressive Christians from violating the separation of church and state.

* * *

The man with demons “was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles.” Jesus healed him, but then “all the people of the surrounding country ... asked Jesus to leave them.”

* * *

The Seventh Phoenix Affirmation, though, invites us into a different understanding of the meaning and purpose of the separation of church and state. As the group of people who have given us the Phoenix Affirmations sees it, the separation of church and state isn’t about what those “other” Christians do or don’t do about abortion, marriage equality, evolution, or anything else, or at least not exclusively. It’s about *us*. It’s about what we – you and I and this congregation and the church universal – are called to do.

In the vision of the Phoenix Affirmations, the church cannot be faithful, cannot be true to its calling, cannot even be church, if it does not speak prophetically to government. And the church cannot speak prophetically to government if the two are intertwined. Without the separation of church and state, the church loses its edge. It loses its voice. It loses its soul. It can no longer be “church.” Without the separation of church and state, the church simply becomes one more arm of the state.

But would that be such a bad thing, to be an arm of the state? Think about all the good “church” might do, if it could use the power and resources of the state. Think about all the reforms it might accomplish if church and state were commingled, instead of separate. Think ...

* * *

The man with demons “was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles.” Jesus healed him, but then “all the people of the surrounding country ... asked Jesus to leave them.”

* * *

In this one story passed down from generation to generation, from community to community, in this one story included in the Gospel of Luke, we can discover anew that church and state need to be separate, not so that church won’t take over the government, but *so that the church can continue to be church.*

In the region of the Gerasenes, the state, the authorities, someone or some group in power, had perceived a threat. They identified a particular man as a danger to the community, and they acted. They acted to keep him away from everyone else. They acted to keep the community safe. They kept this man under guard, bound with chains and shackles.

The method of confinement may seem barbaric to us, but, underneath the chains and shackles, didn’t the authorities do what governments are supposed to do? Identify threats to the community, exercise power and control, sacrifice the needs of a few for the good of the many? Didn’t that long ago community in the country of the Gerasenes act in the way we want *our* government to act ... to keep us safe, to reduce threats to our families, friends, and neighbors, to remove certain people from our midst?

But along comes Jesus, then and now. Along comes Jesus, who does not join forces with the authorities. Along comes Jesus, who showed and continues to show his disciples that the state’s way of operating – the way of power, authority, and control – is not God’s way ... and it’s not meant to be our way, either.

In this ancient story, Jesus comes along and sees, not a threat, but a beloved creation of God. He sees, not someone who needs to be isolated and restrained for the good of others, but someone who needs to be loved for himself, someone who matters to God no less than anyone else matters.

This is the Jesus who calls this church to follow him. This is the Jesus who calls this church to be faithful to its calling. This is the Jesus of the parables of the lost coin, the lost sheep, the prodigal son; the Jesus of the last shall be first and the first shall be last; the Jesus whose life, teachings, and crucifixion reveal over and over again that the fullness of God, the fullness of God’s love and concern, is poured most abundantly on those whom the world and the world’s governments choose to treat as the outcast, the troublemaker, the threat, the least important, the most expendable.

* * *

The man with demons “was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles.” Jesus healed him, but then “all the people of the surrounding country ... asked Jesus to leave them.”

* * *

This morning’s story from the Gospel of Luke puts before us one of the fundamental callings of the Christian church. It is the calling to be a prophetic presence

and to speak with a prophetic voice, to stand outside the norm, outside accepted wisdom and accepted practice. It is the calling to stand with the Spirit of the Living God that seeks the fullness of life for all creation and to stand against all the principalities and powers – governmental, corporate, and personal – that treat anyone as expendable, as less than the precious creations of God that they are.

This is the calling of the church, the calling of the prophetic church. And both of this morning's readings issue a warning to anyone or any church seeking to be faithful to its calling. True prophets are usually seen as threats because they are threats to the status quo, the status quo that keeps hundreds of millions in poverty and a tiny fraction in excess and luxury. True prophets and a truly prophetic church are threatening, unsettling, unpopular. True prophets and truly prophetic churches ask the hard questions and never let go of God's vision of how life *could* be. This makes the prophet and the prophetic church deeply threatening to all governments, organizations, and people who benefit from the status quo ... and my friends, *we* are people who benefit from the status quo.

Be warned, this morning's stories tell us. Being a prophet can be very lonely – just ask Elijah, who flees from Jezebel's threats and who complains, with a touch of self-pity, that he's the only faithful prophet left. Being a prophet can be very dangerous – just ask Jesus., urged to leave the country of the Gerasenes after he heals the man tormented by demons and later urged by his disciples to leave Jerusalem for his own safety. Being a prophet can be lonely and dangerous – just ask Alice Paul, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Coretta Scott King, Oscar Romero, Harvey Milk, Sister Helen Prejean, and so many others who lived and live their lives rooted in God's dream of *Shalom*.

*

*

*

We live in a world imprisoned by a constricted sense of possibility and by the conviction that there is not enough of what we need, so that we have to hoard what we have. The prophet and the prophetic church call us to live differently, to live a life rooted in God's abundance. The prophet and the prophetic church call us to want and to work for an abundance of life for all creation. The prophet and the prophetic church call everyone, you, me, our government, all governments, all people, not to accept what has been and what is as the only possibilities. The prophet and the prophetic church call all who are willing to listen ... to dream and to live with courage, with humility, and with our hope grounded in the power of love.

The importance of being church, then, is the importance of being a community rooted in the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the eternal blessing of the Holy Spirit. It is the importance of finding and speaking our prophetic voice rooted in God's vision of a commonwealth of justice, compassion, and peace. It is the importance of raising a sometimes lonely voice that challenges the modern worship of entertainment, expediency, efficiency, power, and control ... in governments, businesses, our own lives, and even our own churches.

The daunting, usually uncomfortable importance of being church is bringing the radical, often ragged voice of the prophet to the public square and refusing to accept as inevitable the banishment of millions of our brothers and sisters, who are kept under guard and bound and treated as less than human in jails, prisons, and immigrant detention centers and in Guantanamo Bay and Bagram Air Force Base.

The importance of being church is the importance of crying out with the prophet's bold, improbable claim that everyone, *everyone*, is beloved of God and in need of

healing. The importance of being church is the importance of witnessing, as Jesus did, to the holy truth that even those we might think of as possessed by demons, *especially those* we might think of as possessed by demons – terrorists, murderers, bigots, child molesters, enemies of the state – are beloved of God and in need of healing, not hatred, of reconciliation, not retaliation.

The importance of being church is the importance of preserving the ability to see and to say that those the state is most inclined to keep under guard and bound by law, by force, and by inhumane treatment are the ones Jesus sought to heal 2000 years ago and are the ones he is still seeking to heal in and through his church.

We have been called to be church, for one another and for the world. To paraphrase Methodist bishop William Willimon, we are what happens when God works to transform the world, because when God wants to change the world, she calls together an often small, always unlikely group of people and tells them to love one another. What we learn as we love each other and what we can then share with the rest of creation, is the power of love to heal, to restore, to bless, and to honor the beauty of God in everyone and everything in creation.

To be church is to be a bearer of the love that excludes no one. To be church is to be a bearer of the love that dares to speak with the prophet's voice, even when we are afraid, even when we feel all alone. To be church is to be a bearer of the love that no earthly power, no government, no military, no corporate conglomerate, and not even death itself, can conquer. To be church is to be a bearer of the love of God in Christ for you, for me, and for all of creation.

Thanks be to God for the invitation to be church.

Amen.

©Rev. Nancy Alma Taylor
June 20, 2010