

"Crazy Love in a Crazy Time"

Pentecost 5, Luke 8:26-39

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## **I. CRAZY TIME!!!**

It was a crazy week.

In addition to the headline news, there were shocking, tragic losses of children and loved ones—some right here in our community and in our family circles. And, of course the headline-making events. I don't need to tell you what you already know about those, but, we do need to talk about all of it—to hold in prayer, to remember and be mindful. For, if we don't, we and they get even crazier.

We don't need to make sense out of the craziness. In fact, when we try to *make* it make sense, we end up with trite responses that add salt to the wounds. Saying things like, "everything happens for a reason" for example, has no place here as we gather as people of faith to mourn, reflect and resolve to not let yet another tragedy flash across the screen and then be gone in another week.

There was the Orlando tragedy itself—countless innocent Americans gunned-down by *one* man in an act of rage that boggles the mind. How can *one* person have that much anger built up and the sheer ability with something he held in his hands to kill and wound a *hundred* people?!

And then, there was the reaction. The victims were blamed. The President was blamed. The orientation of the club's clientele was blamed. The weapons, the wife, the world itself was somehow responsible for this *irresponsible*, unspeakable act. Unspeakable, unexplainable, yet an *all* too common occurrence in our crazy culture!

## **II. CRAZY MAN AND DEMONS!!!**

It was a crazy day on the hillside. In the region of the Gerasenes.

Jesus and the disciples have just had a crazy night at sea where a storm scared the bejeebers out of them so bad they thought they'd never recover. And Jesus napped! They had to bring him to his senses, wake him up and apply the "don't just *lie* there DO something" method to save their keesters and their keel.

And now, in the next episode, called by some "The Madman and the Pigs," this crazy man full of even crazier demons—and several of them—comes running up to Jesus, demanding he NOT do something and just leave there.

"What business do you have messing with me? You're Jesus, Son of the High God, but don't give me a hard time!" says the man, driven by the demon-voices.

And then, *more* convulsions ensue, and Jesus enters into a **conversation** with the demons—of all things—where he learns they are Legion—a literal MOB of demons, not just one. Then the whole thing gets *weirder*: they actually *recognize* Jesus and beg him not to cast them out to the bottomless pit.

"But, hey, there's a herd of pigs over there, let us go there!"

And, for reasons we don't understand with our "Kindness to Animals" sensibilities, Jesus allows this to happen, and off the little swine go, crazed and crashing down the hillside into the sea, demon-possessed *themselves* now!

And then, just as our pulse is racing and our heads are shaking, the story comes to an abrupt "happily ever after moment." Well, almost.....

**34-36** Those tending the pigs, scared to death, bolted and told their story in town and country. People went out to see what had happened. They came to Jesus and found the man from whom the demons had been sent, sitting there at Jesus' feet, wearing decent clothes and making sense.

It was a holy moment, and for a short time they were more reverent than curious. Then those who had seen it happen told how the demoniac had been saved.

**37-39** Later, a great many people from the Gerasene countryside got together and asked Jesus to leave—too much change, too fast, and they were scared.

So Jesus got back in the boat and set off. The man whom he had delivered from the demons asked to go with him, but he sent him back, saying, "Go home and tell everything God did in you." So he went back and preached all over town everything Jesus had done in him.

### **III. CRAZY PIGS**

"Too much change, too fast, and they were scared."

Who *wouldn't* be?

The man himself was scary, *raging* through the tombs, breaking the chains they put around him in a feeble attempt to control the uncontrollable. Screaming, lashing-out, not to be contained.

We find *ourselves* there, in that overwhelmed place—things and people seemingly out of control, and yet when the tide changes and the demons are cast out, we might not know what to do with the change, and blame the one who saved us. Ask Jesus to leave, even!

I struggled all week with the pig part! Why did Jesus give the order to scapegoat the poor innocent swine? What did *they* do to deserve that?!

It may be the nature of evil, that it's so insidious, that when it's cast out, we question even the pathway. The process.

But really, it's not about the pigs. In our confusion and questioning, in the midst of the crazy times, we need to ask not, "why did Jesus use the pigs as an instrument in this healing, but:

Where are we oppressed by something out of control, unable to *free* ourselves?

What do we need to cast off, over the cliff, so we can sit at the feet of Jesus, clothed in our right mind, restored, renewed in body and soul?

And, where do we throw our own demons over the cliff or onto others? Onto unsuspecting innocents?

What, where, are the "crazy pigs" for us? What are the avenues, the scapegoats, the helpless victims that we cast our demons onto, because we can't deal with them ourselves? Where do we cast our own fears and anxieties because we need to find *someone* to blame?

We need to deal with our demons! Face them head-on. Not put them on to someone else. Make them someone else's problem. "Not my circus; not my monkeys!"

We must exorcize our own demons, with God's help, before we can *begin* to address the evil in our world.

### **IV. CRAZY CASTING OFF**

All week I've been struck *profoundly*—not by the mass shooting, but by our collective response to it. I have been struck, actually, by my own NON-shocked reaction. I was close to the Columbine horror, when 15 people were shot in cold blood. The world *reeled*. That community is *still* reeling. This week, the numbers rose to FIFTY, and I felt no shock. I was numb. Not indifferent, but shocked by the *lack* of shock I felt!

The demons are Legion. They have multiplied, and I fear that I—all of us—have grown immune somehow. Are we so used to living with terrorism—domestic and global—that we truly are helpless, hopeless and out of control? Do we try to use chains as our own feeble attempt to control the uncontrollable, like the people surrounding the Gerasene Demoniac? Were they trying to restrain him because he was a danger to himself, or out of their own self-preservation?

When the demons are Legion, we do have choices in how to respond. Even when it doesn't *feel* like we do.

What needs to be cast out and away from us, our relationships and life together in order to be freed from chains, restored and set on a new path? How do we “love crazy” in response to a hate-crazy week and world?

### **Example: Lack of Dialogue**

I'll tell you one thing that needs to be cast off. Put aside. Gotten over. This complete inability we have as human beings to *dialogue!* We don't talk TO each other anymore. We talk AT each other. We have far more communication than we used to—given social media, TV, blogs, etc. – but we shoot out sound bytes, state opinions and parade our prejudices instead of listening and reflecting and hearing where each other is coming from.

I tried to “host” or moderate a conversation on Facebook this week about guns and the 2<sup>nd</sup> amendment. I was hoping that by encouraging the reading of stories and listening to various pieces of history, different takes on past events and current concerns and opinions about guns, we could “come to the table” and gain greater understanding and perspective on a complex issue.

Well.....

It was *almost* dialogue. Kind of.

I heard of several other situations this week where conflict and disagreement were brewing all over the place in families and friend circles, and I was overwhelmed by the virtual lack or even complete inability to sit down, gather ‘round the table and have an open, honest, truly-listening conversation with healthy dialogue—about *anything!*

Seek first to do no harm the saying goes. How about, “Seek first to understand?” To listen and truly hear, before we jump in with our proposals and perceived solutions?

### **V. CRAZY TO PRAY?**

I also heard an interesting response to the shooting this week by someone saying they were working on gun control issues and other social action in response, but that prayer wasn't really that helpful, because “prayer only changes me.”

I hadn't heard prayer framed in quite that way before, and I pondered this a few days.

I do know that plenty of people have a similar sentiment, aimed in a slightly different way. Aimed at Congress, of all places!

This week a protest was staged wherein some members of Congress declared, “Your tweets and prayers help no one!” They refused to observe a moment of silence, saying: “Our silence does not honor the victims, it mocks them.”

They refused to offer “Thoughts and prayers” when no action to change things was proposed. “Thoughts and prayers” has now become a hollow quip in our society, and in our religion, it would seem.

Traci Blackmon, our top UCC leader for justice, put it in this light instead: “It is not faithful to say a prayer unless you also live the prayer.”

Prayer does only change us unless we also live the prayer—put our action where our prayer is.

To pray is to act. An intention goes with it.

The Jewish religion has a word for this—a key part of prayer—called Ka-VAH-nah. Kavanah is the intention that must go hand-in-hand with any prayer—otherwise prayers are just empty words.

In the words of one sage, "**Prayer without kavanah is like a body without a soul.**" Kavanah's purpose is “to enflame the heart in the service of God.”

### **VI. CRAZY ACTIONS**

And so, thoughts and prayers alone do not help in this crazy time. They alone do not cast off the chains that bind and bring us in our right mind, clothed in compassion and sitting at the feet of Jesus, ready to help. Ready to tell of all the good things God is doing.

But, thoughts and prayers with kavanah—intention, action, living prayer DO!

Some crazy things happened this week in response to the terrible act. Things you just wouldn't expect to see. An Orthodox Jewish

synagogue heard about the horrific tragedy at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, right in the middle of their festival of Shavuot.

Says the Rabbi,

I announced Sunday night from the pulpit that as soon as the holiday (Shavuot) ended at 9:17 p.m. Monday, we would travel from our synagogue in Northwest Washington D.C. to a gay bar as an act of solidarity.

We just wanted to share the message that we were all in tremendous pain and that our lives were not going on as normal.

I had not been to a bar in more than 20 years. And I had *never* been to a gay bar. The bar we picked, called the Fireplace, I found out afterward, was predominantly frequented by gay African Americans.

A dozen of us, wearing our kippot, or yarmulkes, went down as soon as the holiday ended. Some of the members of our group are gay, but most are not. My mother went up to a man who was standing on the side of the building. She told him why we were there. He broke down in tears and told us his cousin was killed at Pulse. He embraced us and invited us into the Fireplace.

We didn't know what to expect, but it turned out that we had so much in common. We met everyone in the bar. One of the patrons told me that his stepchildren were actually bar-mitzvahed in our congregation.

My co-clergy Ruth shared a blessing and she lit memorial candles on the bar ledge. Then everyone put their hands around each other's shoulders, and we sang soulful tunes. After that, one of our congregants bought a round of beer for the whole bar.

Everyone in the bar embraced each other. It was powerful and moving and real and raw.

As we were singing, I looked over at some gay members of our congregation and saw tears flowing down their faces. I felt the reality that we are living in a time of enormous pain.

But I also felt that the night was a tremendous learning experience for me. I learned that when a rabbi and members of an Orthodox synagogue walk into a gay African American bar, it is not the opening line of a joke but an opportunity to connect; it is an opportunity to break down barriers and come together as one; it is an opportunity to

learn that if we are going to survive, we all need each other.

(*Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld leads Ohev Shalom, a Modern Orthodox synagogue in Washington, D.C.*)

Sitting at the feet of Jesus, in our right minds, restored and healed ourselves of the demons that overwhelm us, of the chains that bind us, we are freed up and clothed in compassion and able to love in crazy ways. Things we might never have dreamed of doing before!

As I worked on this sermon, an invitation came in my inbox: "Will Listen With Love." A faithful group has launched a whole new ministry this week in response to the devastating killings in Orlando, the "Will Listen With Love" Project is a national support network comprised of pastors, therapists, spiritual directors and community support providers who have volunteered their time to offer safe and affirming space for grieving members of the LGBTQIA community and their allies to be heard.

Unlike formal therapy, these "listening sessions" are intended to support the LGBTQIA community as they process their sadness and anger over Sunday's massacre in Orlando."

So, I signed up! I don't know what else I can do, but I can sure listen. Put prayer into action.

There are many things we can all do. We are not helpless. The situation is not out of control, raging and storming and breaking out of all restraint around us.

Let us not be overwhelmed, when the evil lurks among the tombs, clamoring loud and grating, defying our every attempt to hold it in, calm it down and lock up tight.

We have to start, first, by sitting at the feet of Jesus ourselves and listening. In our right minds, open-minded and truly hearing one another and Christ's guidance. This happens simultaneously! At the same time the demons—now named and cast off—are charging over the side of the hill and away from us.

## **VII. THE ONE THING**

Yes, it's been a crazy week. But though we may be crushed, at times—it seems, we are pressed down but not destroyed!

I challenge you to pick ONE thing this week. Not a Random Act of Kindness du jour, but something crazy big! A stretch out to connect—like that church totally stepping out of their comfort zone—in possibly crazy ways!

Choose one thing that is not just something you'd do anyway. Some way to respond to the crazy, death-dealing demons, with chain-defying hutzpah! To give intention to your prayers. To put your love and compassion into action.

Something out of your routine; out of your comfort zone.

These crazy times in which we find ourselves call for crazy, over-the-top love. To show we are Christians by our love in a whole new, demon-defying way. Beyond the places we've gone before.

How will you, this *coming* week, *Retaliate* with love?

Amen.