

The Reverend Matthew Hanisian
St. Martin's-in-the-Field Episcopal Church
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
June 19, 2016
Galatians 3:28-29
Luke 8:26-29

The story we have from Luke this morning about the man possessed by a legion of demons and the subsequent healing and drowning of what seem to be an innocent herd of swine, occurs in all three of the synoptic gospels.

Although Mark and Matthew tell the story a bit differently, each adding a particular shade and details to the story, the overall account is roughly the same. Jesus arrives in a foreign land and is presented with a man who was so possessed, so out of his mind, that he was a literal living tragedy, and is healed and made whole again by Jesus and the incredible power of God.

When a national tragedy happens, or even a tragedy that is picked up by the news there is a flurry of activity from all sorts of people. One group that often springs to action, and rightly so, is the Episcopal House of Bishops....statements are made, pastoral letters are sent from the bishop to the members of the diocese.

For better or worse, I receive communications from four dioceses: Southern Ohio (my presenting diocese), Virginia, Washington, and now Maryland. The response to the mass shooting in Orlando early last Sunday morning varied from bishop to bishop, diocese to diocese.

The one that stuck out, however, was the response from Bishop Shannon Johnston, the bishop of Virginia. This is how he started his letter, sent on Monday:

"Brothers and Sisters in Christ, I tried to write this statement yesterday, the day after the horrific mass murder in Orlando, but the right words—the right "feel"—wouldn't come. After letting go of it for a while, I tried again . . . still not right. Then I realized what the problem was: I was angry. More accurately, and more to the point, I was too angry. So, I prayed my way through that for the rest of the day and can now honestly say that I've made it to the other side."

As the details of the shooting became known over the course of the day on Sunday and Monday...and are still being sorted through, the great one-word question surfaces: "Why?"

And, most often a second question bubbles up, usually by those of faith, but also by those who believe that faith in any higher power is ludicrous... "How could a loving God allow a tragedy like this to occur?"

My brothers and sisters, these are questions that have no real answers. We cannot rationalize an irrational act. However, we can identify evil and hate when we see something like the massacre in Orlando.

As we look for elusive answers to these hard questions, Holy Scripture is not exactly "helpful" as to why God allows a tragedy of this magnitude to happen. The prophet Isaiah tells us that we cannot ever fully know the will or mind of God. He explains:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Later in the Bible, Saint Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians sums up this dilemma perfectly:

“For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God.” (1 Corinthians 2:11)

If we cannot know “Why?” What then are we left with?

Anger, confusion, maybe a sense of, “well, I’m glad that didn’t happen here,” or even—and this is if we’re being really honest, “That’s too bad for those people, but really, what good can I do...support is pouring in from all over the place anyway.”

In the gospel passage we heard from Luke this morning, Jesus answers the question of what can be done. He and his disciples have arrived by boat from across the Sea of Galilee to the country of the Gerasenes. The moment His feet hit dry land Jesus is confronted by a man possessed by a legion of demons...not just one or two—which would be a horrible thing in and of itself—but a legion of them. Jesus was not expecting this to happen. Jesus was not warned ahead of time. Instead...out of the blue...there he is...face to face with tragedy incarnate. And Jesus responds.

He responds with the powers he possesses. For Jesus those are pretty enormous. He responds with the very power of God. He commands the demons to leave the man. The man is rendered demon free—restored into his right mind, clothed, made whole again by what Jesus, out of compassion and love is able to do for the man. Instead of being a crazed, naked, tragedy he was transformed into a living example of the awesome healing restorative power of God.

In his pastoral letter to our diocese, dated June 12, Bishop Sutton said, “The mass shooting in an Orlando, Florida club apparently targeted gay and lesbian people, but also American values of freedom for all citizens, and our Christian duty to respect the dignity of every human being were under attack as well.” He continued, “We join with the dozens of families grieving, praying, hoping, waiting, and trying to cope with this massacre. And as people of faith, we have something much more powerful than hatred and terrorism.” He concluded, “And we pray we will have the courage to do what the Gospel commands, to engage the world with the message of love, forgiveness and reconciliation.”

What can we do to engage the world, as Bishop Sutton writes, “with the message of love, forgiveness and reconciliation?” Perhaps the answer is in the fourth chapter of the letter to the Ephesians. The author writes about the powers that each of us is given by God, which are to be used to build up the body of Christ.

“The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:11-13)

We all have gifts and skills and talents that are to be used to help heal this broken world, however we are able. No, not all of us are teachers. Not all of us are pastors. Not all of us are prophets or apostles or evangelists. But we ARE all Christians. We ARE all part of the body of Christ.

The reading from Galatians today says that: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

That means that there is no longer those who are affected by this tragedy and those who are not. There is no longer those who can do something about this and those who cannot. We are all, each and every one of us, called to be witnesses of our faith to the world.

One of the most basic and elementary ways in which we can address and be witnesses of our faith is through our prayers. There is power in prayer.

In his pastoral letter to the diocese of Virginia Bishop Johnston writes, “C. S. Lewis was once challenged by a colleague about the efficacy of prayer, assuming that prayer was meant to influence God. In response, Lewis famously replied, ‘Prayer doesn’t change God; it changes me.’ Bishop Johnston continues: “With all deference to Lewis, I’ll extend this wisdom to say that no, prayer alone won’t change or make right this tragedy, but it can and does change the nature of our relationship to such an unimaginable reality.” He concludes, “In short, prayer is transformative, certainly for the one who prays and, I believe, mysteriously for the ones for whom we pray.”

Prayer is the start of the deepening of our faith. Prayer is perhaps the most powerful shaping agent of our faith. Prayer is the start of our relationship with God. Each and every one of us here—myself included—yearns to deepen our faith, to deepen our relationship with, and understanding of, God.

Each of us does this in different ways and with different gifts—just as the letter to the Ephesians reminds us. We yearn to deepen our faith so that when tragedies like Orlando happen we have a reserve, a deep well of faith, understanding and relationship with the maker of all of creation from which we can draw.

That’s what we are all about as disciples of Christ—to build our faith so that when evil presents itself we can not only identify the evil but overcome the evil forces of this world with our compassion, with our love, with our close relationship with our creator. In doing so we can more fully live into our baptismal covenant, in doing so we can more fully live into the life-giving relationship with God in Christ that binds us all together as beloved children of God.

Today we celebrate those who through their commitment to Education for Ministry—or EfM as it is more commonly known—have completed 4 years of study of scripture, theology and church history. This four year course of study emphasizes our relationship with God and how that relationship is formed and created in community.

You cannot be a Christian all by yourself. And EfM provides those who wish to have a deeper faith life the ability to learn and grow in their faith in a small group, a small community setting. A meal is shared, learning together happens, stories of how our faith and our lives intersect are shared and celebrated. This commitment to deepening our faith, and the basic structure of this curriculum is how the earliest Christians gathered. It answers the question posed in our baptismal covenant: "Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?"

EfM offers a way for those who commit to a deeper knowledge and depth of faith a way to explore, to grow and to be changed by their faith and the love of God. I commend EfM to you, no matter where you are on your journey of faith.

My prayer for St. Martin's, for each and everyone of us is that in deepening our relationship and commitment to God and to one another we will make a difference in this world by being living examples of God's love for the world.

My prayer for us today is that we seek to become not just members of St. Martin's-in-the-Field, but to become disciples of Christ, enlivened by our faith, emboldened by our sure and certain truth, that we are all beloved inheritors of God's kingdom.

Amen.