

Visit to a Strange Land Luke 8:26-39

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost
June 20, 2012 Rev. Adrienne Carr

I grew up in one of those close-knit neighborhoods in Boston where everyone knew everyone else. In the summer, in particular, folks would gather in the evening on someone's porch and talk away the hot hours. We children would play as long as we could see the jump rope or the ball and then sit quietly, trying hard not to be noticed as, like sponges, we took in the combination of gossip and front porch wisdom that poured out on the hot night air, and also, we didn't want to be sent to bed. There was a magic quality to those evenings. Adults and children were wrapped in a comfortable familiarity of trust and certainty. We knew where we were. With absolute certainty, we knew who we were.

When I started High School in 1957, I entered a different world, a strange land – geographically close, yet culturally far from my little corner of the world. While most of the students came from backgrounds similar to mine, I met other girls whose Boston accent was somehow different; rougher and stronger. Some of those girls wore leather jackets with gang colors that their boyfriends had given them. As soon as they were safely away from school property and the piercing eyes of the nuns, they pulled out their cigarettes and started smoking while they talked about rumbles. Wow! Not exactly my neighborhood experience. I had just discovered class differences. My neighborhood had no gangs and girls did not smoke at the age of 14. My absolutism was confirmed. As alien as those girls seemed, I learned that we did have two things that united us: we all hated the school uniform and we all went home and watched *American Bandstand*. In the interest of truth, I went home and watched the Mickey Mouse Club.

Allow me, if you will, to draw a word picture inspired by the Luke passage from today's lectionary readings. Some years ago, when Neil and I and other church members were in Jordan, we traveled to the site of the ancient city of Gerasa. The ruins of this Roman city sit on a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee. We were on a tight schedule and did not have much time to explore the ruins. I would have enjoyed a few hours to wander the streets and imagine the inhabitants going about daily life two thousand years ago as someone brought news that the possessed man down the hill had just been cured by a Hebrew prophet but a herd of pigs was now floating in the lake. We did have time for lunch on the patio of a restaurant built upon some of those ruins.

As we ate, we looked down the hill toward the lake and the place where Jesus might have landed with his disciples. It was very peaceful there and impossible to see the lines drawn on maps that indicate the borders between Israel, Syria and Jordan. We could see the Golan Heights but not the signs that warn about land mines along those borders. In Jesus' time, crossing the lake was not a border crossing because it was all a part of the Roman Province of Syria. Yet the act of crossing was a cultural and religious journey into a foreign land. The Christian community, Jesus had told his followers, is a family and a neighborhood of radical inclusiveness that defies genes and borders. Anyone: be that person Roman, Greek, Syrian, Samaritan, Pharisee, Tax Collector;

woman; anyone who hears and practices the word of God is one of the family. There was to be no absolutism in the Christian community. To a people whose tradition and religious understanding demanded separation from any who were not part of the family; not part of the close-knit neighborhood of Judaism, this was an astounding and quite probably troubling message.

I have wondered what point Jesus was making in bringing his disciples across the lake to Gerasa. Perhaps it was a teaching moment meant to underscore his words about God's inclusive family. The disciples were, for the most part, uneducated people from small towns. No different from their families and neighbors, they were well versed in clean and unclean. They would not speak to a Samaritan or touch a Roman. They fell back time and again into "us and them" mentalities. Even after the resurrection and Pentecost, there was controversy in the church in Jerusalem, as widows from places other than Jerusalem were not being given the care that was tendered to local widows. The twelve under the leadership of Jesus' brother James also had trouble accepting Paul's inclusive theology. Paul, more than any of them, understood what Jesus meant about family but the twelve held onto what they had practiced all their lives. When in doubt fall back on absolutism.

Jesus and the twelve landed across the lake and saw above them the city of Gerasa, inhabited by all those Romans and Greeks and Syrians who ate unclean food and worshipped strange gods. As they passed the cemetery, they heard the screams and yells of a man, who today, would be considered dangerously mentally ill. In those days before drugs, psychiatrists, or inpatient treatment, the community protected itself by banishing such a person – in this case, to the cemetery. Jesus took pity on the man and healed him. In doing so, Jesus sent the evil spirits into a herd of pigs. Highly symbolic, wouldn't you say. The unclean spirits were sent into the unclean pigs who panicked and ran off a cliff into the sea.

The townspeople, among them, I am sure were the pig herders, came to see what had happened. Seeing the man in his right mind, they found no way to celebrate, particularly the herders. Rather than a miracle, they saw danger. In their fear, they asked Jesus to please leave. Somehow a part of their world had changed and they did not like it.

The man who had been cured realized how difficult it would be to find acceptance in his community and asked to accompany Jesus. Instead, Jesus commissioned him to stay and to be seen and heard. This anonymous person was sent as the good news into a city not yet ready to hear or to see. We do not know how things turned out. We do know that in the northern part of Jordan there are Christian towns of ancient origin.

On both sides of the lake people were the same. Gentiles as well as Jews did not want to be challenged to open their minds to something different. They did not want to extend their family and neighborhood beyond the known and comfortable. Their accents may have been different but the message was the same. "Don't expand our horizons or cause us to see strangers and recognize them as family members. Don't make us responsible for one another. We do not want to live outside of the box of our language, culture or religion."

This attitude of isolation is a constant in the gospels. We hear it in the story of the Good Samaritan. We hear it in the words of Mark that are said as a part of each Baptism. "Let the children come." We hear it in the story of rich man who couldn't give up his

comfort to follow Christ and in the Canaanite woman who begged to have her daughter healed.

This message is told over and over in Jesus' confrontations with the scribes and Pharisees. "It is not what a person eats that makes the person unclean; rather it is the words and deeds coming out of that person that define clean or unclean."

As I said earlier, Paul understood Jesus, as did no one else, including Peter. Paul knew what Jesus wanted in his followers: liberating openness. In fact, Paul's letter to the Galatians says just that. He writes: "*There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither slave nor free, there can be neither male nor female for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*"

For me, these words have both universal and very intimate meanings as throughout my life, I have unpacked my absolutism.. In high school, when I encountered those leather-jacketed classmates, I was shocked that someone else's reality was so different from my own. Through four years of high school and growing trust, I learned how to see the person and not the gang colors. One of those rebels went on to get a Ph.D. in Psychology.

Prior to coming to First Church, I was one of a group that worked with the homeless in a Maryland suburb of D.C. We tried, often unsuccessfully, to establish housing and shelter programs in local communities. "NIMBY" Not in my backyard was the refrain we heard over and over again. With ironic symbolism, the local government established a men's shelter in a no longer used bus garage on the edge of a closed dump and built a new garage for the buses. Several years after the shelter had been established, a new housing development began beyond the county property on the other side of the dump. When the new neighbors moved in, they began to complain, not about the dump that they could see from their back yard but about the homeless shelter on the other side of the Dump that they couldn't see – but someone had told them about.

Always, though, in my life and experiences I have found people who have committed themselves to bringing into reality the inclusive family of God. These people see no strange lands; no barriers to openness. Those nuns who taught in my high school were dedicated to the youth under their care and paid as much attention to the gang molls as they did to those of us who walked the straight and narrow.

Those men and women who worked for housing and services for the homeless were church people – still are, many of them; church people who live the good news in word and in action. People, in fact, like Lucy Samara.

The great poet and philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson said: "*Be an opener of doors for such as come after thee and do not try to make the universe a blind alley.*"

There were, there are now and there always will be those who refuse to see family beyond the barriers of home and neighborhood; those who insist on the blind alley. There are many others who yearn for and work toward the time when there will be no strange lands; no barriers of race, religion, sexual orientation or any of those other 'isms' that divide.

On that day in Jordan as I stood at the rail of the restaurant and looked down at the Sea of Galilee, it was a deceptively lovely, peaceful sight. Across the border with Syria there was no hint of the violent bloody struggle that was to come. There in that quiet, I prayed for an exorcism of all the demons that inhibit our ability to be one human family. Someday, in God's good time, that day will come. Amen.