

Time Honored Traditions

Luke 8:26-39

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While I was housebound during May, I watched a lot of daytime television. I think it was Newton Minnow who called television a vast wasteland. When he said those words, there were only three networks. Thank goodness I had a remote. Didn't find much, but I had the remote. I did some reading also. One of my choices was a biography written by Doris Kearns Goodwin: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front during World War II. I learned, perhaps more than I wanted to, about the strengths and the weaknesses of both of those amazing people. Franklin focused on the best manner for resolving immediate needs. Eleanor realized the critical importance of meeting immediate needs but also understood the importance of long term goals. Franklin established the draft. Eleanor argued for inclusion of African Americans in all aspects of military service. Franklin pushed and prodded corporate America to turn peacetime factories from production of cars into production of planes and tanks. Eleanor campaigned for women workers in those factories and day care centers on site. Between his political savvy and her empathic sense of justice,, they changed the course of American life.

As I was reading, I came upon a familiar phrase, 'Time-honored tradition.' So much of what we do as families, communities or as a nation is tradition. Think of the traditions we enjoy here at church. Jazz Sunday, The Chicken Pie Supper, The YETS Trip, and the glorious music at Christmas and Easter all come to mind. I can't imagine the 4th without fireworks or our family's annual Lobster feast in August. And, I'm sorry if I am stepping on toes but I cannot celebrate Christmas without a fresh cut tree complete with holes among the branches and falling needles.

Time honored tradition. The words make sense. They don't require definition or examination. Those traditions represent generations of appreciation for our culture, our aspirations, our way of life. Yet, as I came upon that phrase in my reading, I was shocked into a re-evaluation of the cherished meaning of the words. Goodwin, you see, was describing the generations supported system of segregation that defined the 1940's South through the Civil Rights era of the 60's.

White Southerners lived a traditional belief that separate really was equal; that their maids and nannies and gardeners were happy in subservient roles. If the need to go to war meant draft of African Americans, they would be most comfortable in those "separate but equal' facilities provided for them by the military, and they would serve their enlistment as drivers, laborers and Mess hall attendants. They would not be taught to shoot nor would they be sent to theaters of war. Young white men would be sent to Arica and France to fight and many, to die. Young black men, as patriotic as any whites, were kept at home until

protests by blacks and casualties among whites forced the military to begin to integrate the units abroad. Some time honored traditions are neither gentle, nor honorable.

This focus on tradition came back to me as I was reading the passage from Luke which describes the trip that Jesus and his disciples took across the Sea of Galilee to the town of Gerasa. Gerasa was a Roman town with both Jewish and gentile inhabitants. In fact some of us have walked on the stone roads of the ruins of Gerasa and looked down from its height to the shore of the Lake.

In ancient Israel there was a time honored tradition in Jewish communities to expel the mentally ill, the lepers and those with other handicapping conditions from the community. The cleanliness laws of Judaism required that such people, considered to be unclean, be removed in order to maintain the purity of the community. I would assume that the gentiles of the town would have agreed wholeheartedly with their Jewish neighbors in removing a mentally ill person from the town because that person was frightening in his appearance and demeanor. So, in keeping with tradition and expedience, he was sent out of the town to live in a graveyard. It would be good to know that compassionate people may have brought food or clean clothing to him but that was all they could do. He was uncontrollable. He was unclean.

Jesus and his disciples floated ashore into this heartbreaking situation and, with barely a glance, Jesus understood and responded. Where others experienced revulsion, Jesus experienced anger at what the man was suffering. He saw the raw pain in the man whose mind and body were tightly bound in the chains of physical, emotional and spiritual pain. With authority and compassion, he healed the man and sent all the spiritual disease into a herd of swine. Maddened, the pigs rushed into the water and drowned. Probably worried about their jobs, the swineherds ran up to the town to tell the owners that it wasn't their fault.

The people came down, saw the man in his right mind and were more afraid of Jesus than they had been of the man during the worst of his attacks; consequently, Jesus and the disciples were invited to leave. The man asked to go with them. Jesus gently said that the man needed to stay in the town to remind people of the miracle that gave him his life back, and, perhaps, to inspire healing and reconciliation between him and his family and neighbors.

One of our Church's most vital traditions is that of the Open Door. Our doors swing wide in welcome to shoppers looking for clothing and household goods in the Poss Shop, Jump volunteers and clients, renters using our facilities, visitors who are curious about the church building and others just needing a place of quiet for a few minutes. I would not change that for anything. One day last week as I sat working in the Conference Room, little children in a summer program were preparing for a play in the chapel, a counseling session was going on in the library, JUMP clients wheeling their children went up and down the elevator and people dropped off their donations for the Poss Shop. It was a zoo, and I loved it.

There is a challenge that accompanies our open door policy. On the streets of Burlington there are a number of persons with untreated mental illness. They are known to outreach workers and police but unless they are a danger to themselves or others, no one can give them the medical care that they need. This is, in many respects, similar to the plight of the anonymous man in the Gospel. Several of those persons find their way to the church. Often, they simply want to sit in silence for a time or to talk to one of us. Most of them are as lost in their illness as that young man of so long ago.

Traditionally, Mental Illness has been viewed as a source of embarrassment for families. Centuries ago, with a mixture of compassion and expedience, communities established facilities that became known not by the intended 'Bethlehem' but by medieval slang, 'Bedlam.' centuries later, Uncle Harry was locked in the attic and Cousin Mary was known as being odd as the family accepted with varying degrees of empathy, the care of those with Mental Illnesses. More recently, those with mental illness were committed to the "State Hospital" where they might find humane care or not. Recognizing the need for a different kind of care, State Hospitals were closed or became limited care facilities with the vision that persons with mental illness would be better served living in local communities. What happened is that too few community facilities were created and too many persons with mental illness slipped through the cracks. Some of those are the people we greet in the church.

I have given a great deal of thought to the young man of Gerasa. If we look closely at the young man, we can see a reflection of the life of homeless mentally ill persons today. Our society is not as far removed as we think we are from 2000 years ago. But there is another connection that I make with the townspeople. We fear mental illness as much as they feared it. Is it because we can not do much more than the people of Gerasa to cure mental illness? And is it because we see a bit of ourselves in that young man? I know that I do. I do not generally carry the burden of depression in my life but in the early weeks of my recovery, I felt totally lost and impotent. Several times I cried. I seldom cry. This was not clinical depression but a normal reaction to rather major surgery. I was grateful for the experience because it gave me some insight into what so many among us struggle with constantly. Illnesses such as Bi-Polar Disorder, Schizophrenia, Borderline Personality Disorder affect thousands upon thousands of people in our communities, in our neighborhoods and in our homes. Because of that traditional mindset, mental illness is kept silent and often goes untreated.

Literature from The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill states:

Stigma erodes confidence that mental disorders are real, treatable health conditions. We have allowed stigma and a now unwarranted sense of hopelessness to erect attitudinal, structural and financial barriers to effective treatment and recovery

Diabetes cannot be cured but it can be managed. Mental Illness cannot be cured, but it also can be managed. To be managed means recognizing the disease and seeking help. Caught in the grip of the disease, it is often difficult for the individual to recognize and accept the disease. As Jesus came upon that young man and freed him from the disease, so miracles can still happen if family and friends fight for their loved one to seek the medication and that becomes the miracle of new life.

In other words, our society is no different from that of ancient Gerasa and, for us here in this church, short of tenuous hospitality,, we do not know what else we can do. But that hospitality is what we can do and it is done with compassion and respect for the individuals. Until our societal realities catch up to our societal visions, hospitality is all we can offer. Perhaps in doing this act of faithfulness, we are committing small miracles of healing. For now, it is enough. What would Jesus do? He would be angry at the situation and he would be compassionate toward the afflicted. May we go and do likewise. Amen.