

Fear and Sinfulness
I Kings 19:8-15a; Luke 8:26-39
June 20, 2010

How many of you can remember when you learned to swim? I do. The first time the instructor said he wanted us to practice jumping into the deep end, promising that he would “save us” if we got into trouble. None of us rushed to be the first to jump in. That plea of “just jump” was followed usually by “trust me, I’m not gonna let anything happen to you.” The top of your body leans over the pool but your feet remain firmly planted to the ground. Isn’t it amazing you lean and keep **leaning but your feet just don’t move because you are gripped** by fear, and then you take a giant breath and giant leap all at the same time into the water? You free yourself from your fears and you trust the one who has promised to “save you.” In the process you are changed and there is no going back once your feet have left the ground. In freeing yourself and **in trusting you open yourself to a world of new possibilities. You free** yourself from that which bound you and was keeping you from the joy of swimming, but in the process you learned how to possibly save your own life.

Our gospel lesson has Jesus and the disciples arriving at the country of the Gerasenes after he has just freed the **disciples from their fear of the storm at sea by calming the storm** --- which of course caused other fears in the disciples but that is next week’s sermon. So, Jesus has calmed the storm and they make land only to be greeted by a man possessed by demons. Jesus asks **him a simple question, “What is your name?” (Lk. 8:30)** The **demoniac** replies “Legion.” A legion among the Roman army represented approximately 4,000 to 6,000 men. Some translations have the demoniac replying his name was “Lot,” as in there were lots of spirits within him. While I do believe there to be evil in this world as the Bible clearly speaks to that, when I look at this man’s story **I think his response reflects to some extent his sinfulness.**

In other words, perhaps Jesus is not asking for his name specifically, but is in fact asking **him to name the sin which has separated him from the will of God and** which has separated him from his community. When the man in essence says there are far too many sins to name, Jesus honors the truth that is spoken and frees this man of the burdens he has carried. The burden of not being able to forgive himself of past sins and the burdens of his sinfulness. Jesus forgave this man and gave him permission to forgive himself. In the process he ordered all that was burdening Legion, **all those things that were keeping him away from the will of God** and keeping him from being a part of his community to leave him and to enter into the swine that rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned. (Lk 8:33) Akin to the teaching we find in Micah 7:19 which states, “[God] will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.”

What are the sins in our own lives which separate us from the will of God? Those things **which bind us and that keep our feet planted to the ground** preventing us from being engaged and active in our community. Some of us struggle with the sin of power and greed. Others struggle with the sins of sexism, racism, and/or homophobia. Yet still others struggle with the sin of being so self involved that we cannot see the needs of our sisters and brothers around us. As a country we have suffered at the sinfulness of those who have prioritized money and things over the **life of human beings and the well being of creation. As individuals and as a people** of faith we must take responsibility for our sins. Those of us who identify as liberal Christians must confess our sinfulness in remaining silent and allowing the Bible to be hijacked by the fundamental thinkers who condemn and kill with their words in the name of God. We all have **sinned and we all have at times chosen to separate ourselves** from the will of God. In doing so we have caused harm to ourselves, to our community, and to all of God’s creation. We have been bound and separated by our own sinfulness.

As Christians we know that we are to confess our sins to God, ask for forgiveness, and go **and sin no more continuing to foster and grow in our relationship with God.** What does that look like? For us, as the people of Peace, who are affiliated with the United Church of Christ, we can take courage that our denomination is acknowledging it has remained silent far too long while the Bible has been used to attack individuals, it has been used to condemn rather than hold accountable, and the church has allowed this to happen. We can take note that our denomination is seeking to be **a greater presence in the world and seeking to share with others** a gospel message of personal and communal accountability and inclusion. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey you are welcomed here. That is true not only within our denomination, but it is the gospel message. It is a part of our message today. The man with so many sins he could **not name them all found forgiveness in the presence of God** in Christ Jesus. We see Jesus confronting him, as there must be an account given of what we have done in this world, we have the man speaking the truth about who he is, and we have Jesus offering forgiveness and teaching him the way in which he is to live his life now that he has been **forgiven. The man has been transformed and is willing to go** a different way after he has confessed and been healed or saved from himself.

As the people of Peace UCC we have sins that we must confess. We must hold one another accountable for our choices and our behaviors. But, as we take responsibility for the choices we have made which **are outside the will of God for us, we can also acknowledge** the ways in which we are seeking to live out the gospel message. This past week several of you gathered to put together the birthday bags you see here at the altar. A simple act with really **simple contents, but the boxes of cake mix, icing and party wares** go farther than a party for children of under privileged parents. It is in providing to those that many in society so frequently tell "Get a job and stop living off of my tax dollars," --as though these folks are not or have not

paid taxes—it is in providing for them, these children, that we affirm their value in community with us. We affirm the children who remain invisible and we say to them your life is worth **celebrating. These simple gifts provided here help to nurture the parent child** relationship. If but for one hour or for one day we have brought joy and affirmation into the lives of those who find the living difficult right now, we can celebrate that we have planted a seed that will have a lasting impact. We can celebrate that we provide meals to families at the Hope Center. We can celebrate that we provided food and other goods to several individuals and families this past Christmas. June is **designated national Pride month within the Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual** and Transgender communities. We can celebrate that members of the GLBT communities and their families are welcomed here. We celebrate not in a narcissistic way of “look what we have done for these poor people.” We celebrate that there are times in which we get the gospel message and we are genuinely trying to live it out. Yet as a people of faith we know there is **more for us to do. We must be honest with ourselves.**

Confess our sins and seek the forgiveness of God we must do. Knowing that as human beings we continue to fall short of the mark but we cannot get stuck there. We find in the story of Legion, **who has been saved by the healing** presence and word of God through Christ Jesus, forgiveness. God is always waiting and is always present for us to enter into God’s presence. Forgiveness and grace is **available to us not like a “get out of jail free” card on the Monopoly** board, however. Along with the forgiveness comes the responsibility for us to be intentional in our efforts to change. As I have said many times and will continue to say, we must read our Bibles, pray without ceasing and we must engage in a faith community which nurtures. Let us be intentional about the will of God for our lives, intentional about creating and living in community **with one another, and intentional about caring for all of God’s creation.**

We must move beyond our fears and seek to live our lives in faith. Let us lean forward take a deep breath and leap into the arms of a loving God who affirms that no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey you are welcomed. Let us confess our sins, forgive ourselves and accept the forgiveness offered us by God's grace, intentionally seeking to live into God's will for us for the betterment of ourselves, our community and our world. Amen.

You know the storm at sea in which Jesus says to the disciples, "Where is your faith?"

In this age of Dr. Phil, Dr. Oz and Oprah we are inundated with people sharing those things which frighten and trouble them. Since 9-11 Americans have conceded many of the freedoms once held so dear because of fear. Fear can cripple, infect and cause dis-ease within communities of relatively healthy people.

Joyce Myers refers to FEAR as False Evidence Appearing Real. Now, do not get me wrong, fear can be healthy. If you see a grizzly bear approaching you it would be a wise thing to be in fear for your life. My friend Judi wrote on her Facebook page yesterday about being at a beach in Michigan on Friday and how everyone ran in fear to take shelter because of what was believed to be an approaching tornado. She wrote of that experience, “isn’t it amazing how we walk by each other every day without a second thought but in that moment that we all had to seek shelter from the storm we huddled together as if we were all we had.” It was their understandable fear that unified her and all the strangers who chose to huddle together in the first shelter they could find from the storm. They sought comfort and refuge from the storm with one another, no longer strangers, but a community united. But there are unhealthy fears which bind us and keep us from living into God’s will for our lives. Those fears affect not only us, but they affect the greater good of the larger community as well.

So in the midst of the work and service for God how do we continue to seek to live into the will of God for our lives? We confess our sins and ask for forgiveness seeking to live out the grace of God. That means also going to scripture and meditating upon God’s word. It means seeking to be in the presence of God through prayer. It also means seeking to be an active and engaged member of our faith community and our world. But the reality is we find ourselves doing things that we have often swore we would not do again. We are human beings and this is part of our human struggle in seeking to live into God’s will for our lives. In today’s reading and throughout our scriptures we find God’s grace, we find forgiveness.