

Becoming Normal

1 Kings 19:1-15a, Psalm 42, Galatians 3:23-29 Luke 8:26-39

Last Sunday brought the tragic news from Orlando, a gunman of Afghan descent murdered 50 people and wounded even more at an LGBT night club.

The first reports focused on radical terrorism, ISIS and religious/political motives for this horror, yet as the week unfolded, the news changed.

The man who committed these atrocities, according to his ex-wife and many others, was himself gay – in the closet perhaps, but indeed a gay man, who, like so many before him, apparently hating himself, killing so many, and then himself, because he couldn't see himself as normal.

Apparently the root of this massacre wasn't ISIS, nor twisted Islam, but self-hatred.

Sad to say but organized religion, Christian, Jewish and Muslim, has for many years encouraged, explicitly or implicitly, self-hatred among those who are different, whether that difference is sexual orientation, race, gender, divorce,

And when we do such things in the name of God, we commit blasphemy, we betray our faith, and we are in profound need of God's forgiveness.

Just listen to the readings today.

For those who say you must belong to this faith or to that denomination in order to be saved, just listen to God speaking through the prophet Isaiah this morning.

"I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me.

I said, "Here I am, here I am," to a nation that did not call on my name."

God is a God who loves all human beings.

Paul's letter to the Galatians drives that message home this morning.

In Paul's day, humanity is divided between Jews and Gentiles; slaves and free; male and female: those distinctions pretty much covering the map, distinctions that Paul once believed were heaven sent, yet, once Jesus knocks him on his backside and blinds him, Paul joyously comes to see that....

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, ... slave or free, ... male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Today we might add: there is no longer Catholic or Protestant, gay or straight, Muslim or Hindu, but all are one in Christ Jesus, precisely because God is a God who "seeks those who do not ask, who is found by those who don't seek her."

Which is a message organized religion has run from so fast you'd think our pants were on fire!

Imagine the implications!

No more "us vs them," no more "saved and damned," no one for me to look down my nose at....

No wonder we run so fast!

It's an outrage!

It's a relief....

Because all of our divisions, all of our classes and categories.... are lies.

Our love of dividing ourselves from one another is a symptom of "the evil in the world that is so much greater, that goes so much deeper, than personal wrongdoing by individuals.

There is something in this fallen world that distorts everything, messing everything up.

We need deliverance.

And deliverance is what Jesus brings through the Holy Spirit because Christ conquers the demons, those forces of evil in the world that alienate us from one another, that alienate us even from our own selves.

Those demons want us to believe that being normal in the eyes of God requires a life lived in the straightjacket of narrow expectations.

But God's definition of normal is that we be freely and fully human, that we glory in the rainbows diversity creates.

These demons are indeed Legion, and they travel by many names: war, injustice, racial bigotry, religious hatred, homophobia, sexism, poverty, and slavery to money.

The mission of Christ is not only about healing individuals, it's about delivering the whole world from our enslavement to the corrupt and evil systems which crush and kill." K. Leech, Collected Works (paraphrased).

That's where today's gospel takes us, to the tombs.... where a once possessed man is now normal, sitting at the feet of Jesus.

The irony is that the townsfolk, who don't see themselves as demon possessed, are scared to death by the healing, the normalcy, that Jesus brings, and they beg him to leave; because in fact their whole society is ruled by demons, and they love their demons, they fear anyone who threatens those demons; just as we are afraid when someone talks of dismantling the Pentagon, or welcoming immigrants or changing our economic system so that it is more equitable....

Because we too love our demons....

Most folks today scoff at the notion of demons, and yet I wonder if we should be so quick to dismiss them.

Many of us have wrestled with the spirits of jealousy or envy or greed, lust, anger and pride....

These spirits lead us into places of regret, shame, bitterness.

And they aren't the only spirits with which we must contend.

There are spirits that infest our institutions, our collective consciousness:

Spirits that demand an eye for an eye.

Spirits that justify the grotesque accumulation of wealth by a few while the vast majority live in squalor.

Spirits of demagoguery and fear.

These are the powers and principalities that blind us to the abundant life God intends for us, a life where we can each be true to the unique person God has made.

Jesus is stronger than any spirit; he is always ready to free us from their snares.

"Christ comes to shatter the domineering designs that chain people to lives of denial, shame, self-hate to prejudice and pride and greed.

Christ is among us, especially when we gather as the church, to carry out that saving power....

If we devote ourselves to anything less than this magnificent destiny we miss the goal of faith." D. Lose paraphrased.

"What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?"

Isn't that our question too?

One minute the whole world seems to be under our control, the next minute, everything seems to be slipping away....

When and where will the next lone wolf strike?

Will our economy ever recover for the middle class?

Where did the aloha spirit go?

"What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?"

In the weeks to come, Jesus invites tax collectors and prostitutes to dinner.

He welcomes people whom no self-respecting holy man would ever welcome, pointing the way to this truth: **in him, we are all one**: gay and straight, Christian and Muslim, black, white, asian, pacific islander, all of our categories are shattered — so that lo and behold — the marvelous diversity of humanity — created and blessed by God — can sparkle as the apple of God's eye.

And there's something else to the new normal created through Jesus.

Jesus rejects the false "opposition of the 'spiritual' and the 'material,' the 'sacred' and the 'profane,' the 'religious' and the secular,' and denounces, abolishes and reveals this monstrous lie that tries to separate God and humanity and the world.

The only true temple of God **is humanity**, and through humanity — the world.

Each ounce of matter belongs to God and is fulfilled in God.

Each instant of time is God's time, and is fulfilled in God's eternity.

Nothing is 'neutral.'

For the Holy Spirit, as a ray of light, as a smile of joy, has 'touched' all things, all time — revealing them as precious stones of a precious temple." Fr. A. Schmemmann, For The Life of the World, paraphrased.

That's the message the Orlando shooter never heard.

By gathering up all of creation, Jesus begins the banquet promised so long ago by the prophet Isaiah:

"On this mountain, the Lord ... will make for **all peoples** a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow.....

... he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over **all peoples** ... he will swallow up death forever.

And God will wipe away the tears from **all faces** ... for the Lord has spoken. (Isa. 25:6-8)

This is what becoming normal means to God!

Thanks be to God!

+amen

