

Padres and Proverbs -- Pentecost 4C Proper 7

Let us just take a moment to acknowledge the fathers here present with us today. Will all the fathers please stand and be recognized?

O Lord our God, creator of heaven and earth, through your Son Jesus Christ you have revealed yourself as a heavenly Father to all of your children. Bless, we pray, all earthly fathers. Strengthen them to nurture, protect, and guide the children entrusted to their care. Instill within them the virtues of love and patience. May they be slow to anger and quick to forgive. And through the ministrations of your Holy Spirit, may all fathers be strong and steadfast examples of faithfulness, responsibility, and loving-kindness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Because it's not easy being a father. It is not nearly so easy to be a father as to become a father; the latter enterprise is far more challenging, and a good deal lengthier. One day your kids are playing 'Hail to the Chief,' and the next day it's 'Mack the Knife.' Try teaching your son a skill. Sometimes it seems as though every slight critical adjustment is perceived as an outrageous personal attack. The difficulty is our relentless stream of expectations and comparisons. The task each of us faces is to distinguish the challenges and expectations of our own lives and

accept the responsibility for interpreting the World anew for our own times. As Saint Paul insists in our reading this morning, we children must not be slaves to the laws and interpretations of the past. We must indeed take them into serene and sober consideration as we make plans for our own lives – by faith, and our parents' job is to create space for that considered planning, even when the cost is high.

A young boy was driving a hayrack down the road...He's under that pile of hay.

Now you might say this boy managed to separate his issues from his father's a little too readily, but he was very young. As a teenager, I spent some time farming, and was in fact once on the bottom of a fallen pile of hay. It was not pleasant. Now that we're back safely on the subject of hog farming, what in tarnation can we make of the scene we just heard from Luke? It is important to remember that the story was written in a time and culture when swine were considered impure, inedible and untouchable. So their loss, just like the loss of all those priests of Baal whom Elijah slaughters, is only of metaphorical significance to us. They each represent the unhealthy and expendable segment of Creation, of society, of ourselves which can and even must be eliminated for us to thrive in God's World. These are powerful stories, but dangerous too. Christianity has had to learn not to take itself too literally. We are still learning.

The great Kathleen Norris has observed: “Most people will not come out and say that they are good people in contrast to those who are not, but that is often what they mean. This is the most dangerous of propositions. History demonstrates, repeatedly, that when enough people define themselves as “good” in contrast to others who are “bad,” those others come to be seen as less than human. Mass murder, terrorism and genocide are all justified in the eyes of those who perpetrate them on the grounds that real people are not being killed; rather, something evil is being eliminated from the world by those who are good.”

I can tell you, hogs are not necessarily more or less good than any other creatures. Hog farming has its ghastly aspects, but so does raising cattle or poultry, or catching fish. People are the same. Muslims, Mexicans, LGBTQ’s, people of color, WASPS, none are necessarily more or less good than any other people.

Oscar Wilde once asked, “How else but through a broken heart may the Lord Christ enter in?” Perhaps this is why Jesus is continually drawn to the shattered, the broken, the marginal, the oppressed. When he arrives among the Gerasenes, he immediately meets the possessed man. Jesus’ entire interaction with this community is based on his encounter with this fellow.

The fellow is the repository of innumerable demons. Everyone in the community can point to him and say, “Look, he is the bad one here.” A scapegoat. In the ancient tradition, each year an actual goat would be used to carry the sins, the demons of the people out into the wilderness. In this story, the demoniac serves the same purpose. Today we each have our own list of baddies, and while our society as a whole certainly doesn’t condone vigilante violence based on individual beliefs, nevertheless, we have been unable to stem the stunning proliferation of shooting that is so evident this week.

The mass slaying that took place in Orlando was a monstrous atrocity. Our hearts bleed for the victims and their families. As Gregory Sterling pointed out, “The determination to take a human life is not only a crime against God, it is a crime against oneself as a human being. It puts the person in the position of being God by presuming that the person has the right of the Creator to end life. While it is wrong to do this out of passion or greed or hatred, it is unthinkable to do this in the name of God. Killing in the name of religion is a claim that God is complicit in the act, a claim that makes God evil.

We are grateful for the imams who have opposed this act and join them in rejecting it as a so-called act of piety; it was an act of insanity. But we must also look at ourselves as a society. What was unthinkable has become routine for all but those directly affected

by these tragedies. You don't even have to be against the Second Amendment to realize that we have a serious gun problem. If we do not act to limit the free flow of guns, we will all have blood on our hands. Similarly, we cannot glorify violence as a form of entertainment and then scream against it when it is no longer a fiction. Many do not want to hear these views, but we cannot continue as we have.

“Most Muslims are appalled when violence is done in the name of their faith by people who claim to be of their religion. Their sticking point is always this: “they don't represent us”, a statement made by both peaceful moderates and violent extremists — and they are both right. There is no central Islam that defines that nuances of that faith for everyone. But many look towards Saudi Arabia as the most central and authoritative school of thought with Mecca as its uniting shrine. Non-Muslims are not welcomed to Mecca, and have been met with violence. Saudi Arabia practices oppressive Sharia Law which condones the killing of gay men and women.

With urgency, the household of Islamic faith needs to gain the ability to undergo a true self-critique, beginning when that household of faith comes to grips with its violent past and stops denying it. Too many of the faith's adherents continue to be taught such violence in their schools and mosques, so let's stop pretending that violence exists in isolation, and is only perpetrated by mentally unstable people.

In many places, the Islam of today would look very recognizable to someone from the 7th century; it hasn't changed much. But the world has changed. There is a Senegalese proverb: "*Nu ma doon waax baay, juru ma leen.*" It means "I am not the father of all who claim to be my children." A world-view that is at odds with a peace-bound and welcoming faith is no longer a valid interpretation of the Koran.

Alhamdoulillah and thanks be to God for the many millions of faithful Muslims who distance themselves from such horrific teachings. "These are the people who can lead Islam to critique and reform. It is now Islam's turn to self-critique, to not deny its own realities, to have its Reformation, and that means that loud reformers need to stand in its worldwide schools and mosques to condemn violence and intolerance."

What Jesus accomplishes by removing the Gerasene scapegoat, by taking away their black sheep, the demoniac who holds all the badness in the town in himself, by in a sense baptizing away the demons in the sea is to unplug the social machine of deflected violence. Jesus' cleansing action removes the option of unloading fear, frustration and self-righteous anger onto others.

The result, as St. Paul insists, is a life led away from individual and community violence and toward personal accountability. As the proverb goes, "*Cada*

uno es hijo de sus obras.” Each of us is the child of our own actions. In this new life, there will be no more use for violent stories, no use for scapegoats or black sheep, mass incarceration, brutal killing. The fears born of comparisons and expectations will be dispelled, and we – not just fathers and sons, but also neighbors local and global -- can become companions, partners in helping one another; free children capable of compassion, forgiveness and choice.

A father was watching his young son trying to dislodge a heavy stone. The boy couldn't budge it. “Are you sure you are using all your strength?” the father asked. “Yes, I'm trying,” the boy replied, and still the rock would not move. “Are you sure you are using all your strength?” the father persisted. “Of course I am,” said the boy, exasperated. “No you're not,” said his father, “You haven't asked me to help you.”

Children, give your fathers permission to abandon old systems of violence and scapegoating so they can help you. Fathers, give your children the freedom to ask for help without being required to buy into your old systems. Alone we will fail – together prevail! It is humbling, scary, hard work. It is the work of faith and faith alone, and it will never disappoint you. As the proverb goes, “Padre Viejo y manga rota – nunca se deshonoran.” An old father and a ragged sleeve will never be dishonorable.