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St. James', Mt. Airy  
6/19/16

Proper 7C  
1 Kings 19:1-15a  
Psalm 42  
Galatians 3:23-29  
Luke 8:26-39

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.**

I have spent more time in prayer about writing a sermon this week than I have for a long time. I've been trying to figure out how to preach **here, today**, in the aftermath of the deadliest mass shooting in our modern history – trying to find the words to help us make sense of this broken world we live in and where the Good News is in the midst of it.

And I've been dreading it, a bit, because how do you preach to a mostly white, straight, rural/suburban congregation about an urban, ethnic, LGBTQ tragedy? That's a lot of lines to cross, I still don't know where all the lines are, **here**, at St. James.

I do not preach partisanship. That is to say, I'm not in the business of telling people who to vote for, or how to vote on issues. I'm always happy to discuss these things with folks individually, and point you toward the stances the Episcopal Church has taken on topics if folks are interested.

And yet the great theologian Paul Tillich was spot on when he said we must hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other if we are to make sense of either.

So I want to acknowledge that this sermon, more than most, intersects with politics – at least in the sense the lines that divide us in the world are often political. And as I said, I don't know all the lines **here**, the dynamics at play, the point at which each of you will listen with your heart, and the point at which you will stop listening and write this all off.

So what lines **do** I know?

I know that after The Rt. Rev. Gene Robinson was consecrated a bishop, the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church, St. James' faced conflict and some members left. Those who remained worked with Rev. Portia to do the hard work of conflict resolution and reconciliation.

I know there are folks here who have LGBTQ children and family members.

And so I hope that hearts **here** are breaking alongside mine for a community that was targeted last week, and unfortunately and honestly, is target in large and small ways every day. I hope you will pray with me for an end to hatred, bigotry, and oppression.

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Where is the line **here** when we talk about gun culture in America? That's a trickier one for me.

This parish is more rural than any other I have served in. The dynamics of gun ownership and use are therefore different here than in cities and suburbia. When I took the training to be a volunteer in my boys' schools here in Carroll County one of the things they told everyone is that school campuses are gun free zones.

They then added on this reminder: please remember this and make sure to unload the gun rack in your truck by Monday morning. Totally makes sense, and not like any other gun safety talk I've experienced in a school or works setting.

I don't propose to have perfect answers to hard, complex issues. Nor do I believe there is only one right answer, as many shout.

**And**, the fact that yesterday marked the anniversary of the shooting of the Mother Emmanuel nine – and that there have been enough mass shootings in the year between then and now to make us nearly numb to another – tells me we need to pray about this together, we need to sit down and listen deeply to each others' stories and experiences, and we need to ask our elected officials to do the same.

Because I truly believe that God weeps, not only for those who are killed, but for us who allow ourselves to be driven apart, rather than finding common ground.

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What does all this have to do with Gospel? What does all this have to do with us as people of faith? **Everything**, I believe.

Because the root sin in all of this, in all the brokenness in our culture, is the sin of **other**.

In God's eyes, there is no **other** – for we are all children of God – and we are made to be in community with God and each other.

Paul wrote about it this way to the people in Galatia who were struggling with who could be members in their church: *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

And today's Gospel passage from Luke, the story of the Gerasene demoniac, is about exactly this.

*Jesus and his disciples arrive at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee.* In this story only does Jesus purposely step outside of Jewish territory, a foreshadowing of the commission to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth in Acts. But his power is not limited, and even here the love and healing of God reaches.

For the first person he meets is the ultimate outsider – one who is wholly outside of community – an absolute **other**.

A man filled with demons, naked, unable to be contained, living among the tombs of the dead.

*What is your name?*

*Legion.*

A deep truth spoken here, the power of the many ways the powers of the world push out the love of God.

And Jesus heals him. He commands the demons to leave him, and they do.

But what is more, what is essential, is Jesus sends him home – back into community – to declare how much God has done for him. He makes him the first missionary to the Gentiles.

Whenever we read stories of Jesus overturning the status quo of otherness, when he tears down the walls we build between each other, it brings to mind this little poem by Edwin Markham:

He drew a circle that shut me out--  
Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.  
But Love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle that took him in!<sup>1</sup>

This is the call of the Gospel, to make the circle ever bigger, to burn so bright with the love of God that people are drawn to it. To heal the sin and divisions around us.

This is big work. The work of community. The work of our entire lives. And there is no instruction manual, other than to love. There are no easy answers to complex issues, other than to love. Because love is the source of healing – and it is from that which the world will be transformed.

This feels to me to beginning of a conversation, not the end of a sermon, and so I want to close with this reflection written in the aftermath of the shooting in Orlando:

Jesus meets a man under the power  
of something foreign to his own soul,  
but not just a man: a people, a world.  
But he sees the person beneath the demon.

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<sup>1</sup> From “Outwitted.”

The man lives among the dead,  
cherishes, perhaps, the aura of death.  
His demons lead to violence; all violence is demonic.  
They are "Legion." There is more than one:  
it is an army (a Roman legion), a culture.  
Neither blaming nor curing one man will bring peace.

The demons cry out against Jesus.  
There is always resistance to healing,  
rage at the offer of mercy.

Jesus casts the demons into a herd of swine.  
Who would eat the meat of so many unclean beasts  
but a legion of the Roman army?  
Jesus casts the Roman Empire into the abyss.

The locals are afraid.  
They take up the demons' cry and cast Jesus out.  
There is always resistance to healing,  
rage at the sight of love.  
The man, now restored, wants to follow Jesus  
but he sends him back to his city, his world,  
living proof of God's transforming grace.

So many systems are at work, legions of demons,  
cultures, communities, armies of fear.  
The drama is local but the struggle is cosmic.  
Jesus, too, works with a power beyond his own soul,  
a power that heals people and cultures,  
love that sees persons beneath labels  
that sends fear into the sea,  
that re-orders the cosmos.

We face legions and their weapons;  
the enemy is never one man and his demons.  
But when Christ heals even one person  
the world tips and plunges evil into the sea.  
Love destroys what the Empire of Fear feeds on.  
We are at the edge of the abyss,  
the dark waters of Creation,

where God calls forth light.  
And those who have been set free  
go through the city as the light  
of what God has done.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Steve Garnaas-Holmes, [www.unfoldinglight.net](http://www.unfoldinglight.net).