

Sermon for Proper 7 Year C

[RCL] 1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a; Psalm 42 and 43; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

Relationships are tricky. They require both well-formed individuals and a cohesive communal whole. Individuals who are too isolated, and deprived of human contact are often quite damaged. Mad and raving at the edge of society, in the tombs, in either literal or metaphorical deserts, in places where demons dwell... And people who are too group-centered, who have no boundaries, who can't tell where they end and where anyone else begins are often equally damaged and damaging. We are built for and called into relationships by God. And this central truth about us reveals some profound paradoxes at the core of our being: We crave independence and we fear being alone. We long for togetherness and we fear being assimilated.

To hear Paul say “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,” is both a comfort and a challenge. It's wonderful to feel like we're not alone in the world. And it's terrifying to lose our identity. Assimilation to any kind of hive-mind destroys so much of what we value about human experience: uniqueness, beauty, and difference. We hold independence, identity, and free will as prized, positive values, but we also highly value, and need community, togetherness, and connection. The idea of becoming one with Christ, one with all that is, if it means losing our whole identity, can be frightening.

The demons understood this. They “begged him not to order them to go back to the abyss.” The abyss is that primordial “deep;” the undifferentiated soup that God's spirit moves over in the beginning of creation. It's the dismal mass of chaotic stuff that God creates from—that God separates and orders into the beautiful and good creation. To return to that is to disappear into murky sameness. Losing their identity is terrifying even for demons.

Learning to balance our genuine need for independence with the equally important and likewise genuine needs of our communities is a lifelong work.

The demons appear to insist on isolation; they torment this man into breaking the bonds with the community, and they drive him into the wilds alone. But the people of Gerasene are perhaps exacerbating the situation by forcibly keeping the man in relationship, in the community, by keeping him “under guard and bound with shackles.” Thus, we have an image of a person simultaneously tormented by his isolation and his chains.

Individuality and community are twin poles we are often stretched between. How many of us were raised to “stand on our own two feet” and “take care of things ourselves” and then found it hard or impossible to ask for help when we really needed it? How many of us have been taught that it's better to “go along to get along” and “not make waves” only to occasionally be overcome with resentment because we agreed to do something for the good of the community that we really didn't want to do? How we navigate this tension, and live with one another in relationship matters a great deal.

Finding the right blend of independence and togetherness is hard; it's an ongoing balancing act—a kind of marriage—between independence and community. And as Christians we have a model for the kind of relationship that both guards our independence and ensures community; it's the model of Christian marriage. Marriages and weddings are different things: a wedding is a single event on a particular day; a marriage is an ongoing relationship that lasts for years. Sadly, in the secular culture marriage is too often viewed as a kind of chaining together of two people. But Christian marriage is a sacrament. An outward and visible sign of the kind of vital relationships that God calls us into. For Christians, marriage is a symbol, an icon, a representation of all holy, covenantal relationships. Marriage signifies to us the mystery of the union between Christ and Christ's church. And as such it is a model for all Christian relationships, every one of which is to be based in mutual joy, shared help and comfort, in sickness and health, in prosperity and adversity. Marriage, in other words, is a microcosm of community. And like all communities it requires well-formed individuals who are committed to the well-being of the whole.

Poet Rainer Maria Rilke speaks to this understanding. In one of his letters when he writes:

“Marriage is in many ways a simplification of life, and it naturally combines the strengths and wills of two people so that, together, they seem to reach farther into the future than they did before... The point of marriage is not to create a quick commonality by tearing down all boundaries; on the contrary, a good marriage is one in which each partner appoints the other to be the guardian of their solitude... A merging of two people is an impossibility, and where it seems to exist, it is a hemming-in, a mutual consent that robs one party or both parties of their fullest freedom and development. But once the realization is accepted that even between the closest people infinite distances exist, a marvelous living side by side can grow up for them, if they succeed in loving the expanse between them, which gives them the possibility of always seeing each other as a whole and before an immense sky.”¹

Alone and naked in the tombs or chained and under guard no one was able to see the man as whole before Jesus came. Our need for both independence and community means that too often we seek to create quick commonalities by tearing down boundaries instead of loving the expanses between ourselves. We opt for the quick fix of chaining ourselves and others to an ideal of superficial sameness. We insist that others are welcome as long as they look and act just like us, and if they don't there must be something wrong with them; something that needs to be corrected.

This is the movement of the demonic impulse that insists on isolating and universalizing experience... “My way is the right way! The only way.” The demonic drive for too much independence creates disconnected individuals that assume “my” individual or “my” group identity is THE standard, THE norm for every other group or individual. In this way, individuals

¹ Letter 24, to Emanuel von Bodman, 1901, Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke - Vol I: 1892-1910, ed. Jane Bannard Greene, Read Books, 2007, ISBN 1406729655

are turned not into a community, but into “Legions.” And the great diversity of human experience is thus reduced to a single point of view, and held to a single (often unattainable) standard. That might make some of us feel more comfortable in the short run, but it’s deadening in the long run.

The movement of God always goes the other way. The movement of God respects diversity. It brings together and binds up diverse experience in a cohesive whole. It constantly invites into community those who are outside the cultural norms: women and men, Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, us and them. And that’s often frightening.

When the demons had left and the man was sitting at the foot of Jesus “clothed in his right mind” the people were afraid. Yes, real relationships are scary. Especially those that strive to be icons of the relationship between Christ and those who sit at his feet—the Church.

Relationships often feel safer when we’re around people who **are** similar to us. People who like us, and whom we like. Yet, the walk with Jesus is constantly asking us to open up that circle and to accept, and even love, people who aren’t like us. Not by chaining them to us, but by allowing and loving the expanses between us. God is constantly moving us from “even them?” Even the Greeks? Even the slaves? Even the ones who live in the tombs? Even them? To: Yes. Even them. Relationships are tricky, and these are the kinds of relationships we as Christians are called to. Neither a radical isolation nor an undifferentiated togetherness, both of which lead to madness and the breaking of community. We are called to relationships where a marvelous living side by side takes place. We’re called to love the expanses between all of us, and to seeing ourselves and all of God’s children as whole, and complete and gathered together before an immense sky. Amen.

Written by The Rev. Richard Burden, PhD

The Rev. Dr. Richard Burden was called as Rector of All Saints Parish in 2014. Born and raised in Colorado, Richard received a BA in Theatre Arts from Colorado State University, an MA in history from the University of Colorado at Denver and a PhD from the University of Chicago, where he studied Christian conversion in early 20th century China. He began his first career as a bookseller working at the Tattered Cover in Denver, and after a journey through academia he discerned a call to ordained ministry which led him to the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, in Berkeley, CA. Richard was ordained in 2009 and was first called to the Episcopal Diocese of Lexington to serve as Priest in Charge, and also to help develop a groundbreaking program of leadership and congregational development known as The Network for Pastoral Leadership. In 2013, he began to sense God calling him in a new direction, this time to New England. He is a Fellow of the Beatitudes Society. He says, “I went into ordained ministry because I wanted to be a catalyst for individuals and communities to become the people that God needs them to be and to do the work God so urgently needs them to do.” With his spouse Monica he is also a parent to two school aged children. His recorded sermons are available at allsaintsbrookline.org, you can contact him through the All Saints Brookline Facebook page, twitter @allsaintsbline, and instagram.

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