

Close Friend Refrigerator Kind of Church

June 6, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Luke 8:26-39

Will you please pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and redeemer. Amen.

This past week I had the joy of going to an outside reunion gathering for a church choir I used to be a part of. It was a surprise celebration of the choir director's 20th anniversary with the group. Once we all gathered together, someone made some announcements at the beginning that especially put me at ease as I stood in a group of people larger than I've been used to being around this past year. She said, welcome everyone! Since it's one of the first times we've been together since the pandemic please do what you feel comfortable with. We've all been vaccinated, but whatever you need to do to feel safe, we want to support you. We then took a moment to say all of our names so that everyone was properly introduced, and I have to say that even though I hadn't seen most of the people there in well over 2 years and there were several new faces, I felt this overwhelming sense of belonging. This place, more so, these people, felt like home to me, not because I knew all of them, but because there was an explicit statement that no matter how I needed to show up I belonged there, just as I am. We all belonged, and our needs mattered. Our names mattered. Our complicated experience of this life mattered and that made all the difference.

I'm sure many of us have been doing things that have felt like new additions to our routines lately. There is a feeling of joy and excitement, of course, and also in some cases some trepidation too as the trauma and grief of this time apart surfaces during activities that feel too far from what has been our new normal. In this time of transition, for some it may be a time of pure joy, of jumping right back into things as they were, noticing that things feel right, there might even be a sense of relief for all those extraverts who have been staring at blank calendars for far too long; for others, it may bring more complicated feelings, perhaps even discomfort that it's all changing so fast, that we might forget what has happened in pursuit of feeling like things are back to normal, back to the way things always were. Perhaps some people even have some fear that we collectively might just forget the unjust systems revealed, the strangers and loved ones who have passed, the PTSD we've developed, or the ableism of news personalities saying "this virus only kills people with pre-existing conditions..." or perhaps some

of us are all too aware of the potential of those still marked by any and all of those experiences being left behind. There is joy yes, and with all transitions underlying worry as well. We are not the same people we were a year and a half ago, that is for certain and wherever we are on that spectrum that is ok.

Our scripture passage from the Gospel of Luke for today brings with it not pure joy or pure fear, but a complicated mix of feelings for its reader. While it is ultimately a story of good news and liberation it definitely makes it to the top of my list of truly terrifying scenes in the New Testament. It reminds me of one of those horror movies with good special effects that depict the things of Halloween nightmares in an all too real way. You see, Jesus was traveling into gentile territory outside of Galilee and the first thing he encounters as he steps out of his boat is this man who is possessed by demons, running around naked, living in tombs, without a home. The man darts towards Jesus, falls down at his feet and yells at the top of his voice “what have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” In response Jesus asks him his name and the man replies “Legion.” The word legion is used in the roman military to describe a group of 6,000 soldiers, implying that there is an occupation of 6,000 demon spirits within the man. In my mind, the reply is not in the man’s usual tone of voice but has the force of 6,000 voices bellowing at Jesus who dared to get close to this man who lived amongst the tombs. Perhaps the force of it all is enough to rustle some of Jesus’ hair and robes as he stands still and calm before this person overwhelmed with voices that are not his own.

In this moment, Jesus doesn’t do something all that miraculous, or maybe he does. What he does is he pays attention. He asks the man his name and lives out his theology that every soul matters in God’s kin-dom through how he interacts with him. What comes next is some sort of exorcism leaving the man clothed and in his right mind. In the end the man sits at the feet of Jesus instead of at the threshold of tombs. He finds where he belongs.

In the past several 9:30 adult formation hours we have been exploring how different forms of liberation theology can be applied to our engagement with our sacred scripture. An expression of liberation theology called Disability theology helps us wrestle with the complicated interpretation history of the healing narratives of the Bible. Oftentimes exorcism narratives concerning individuals possessed with demon spirits like the one that we are exploring together this morning have been read as a metaphor for the experience of mental illness, which at the very least, I find problematic and at its worst is literally further demonizing and stigmatizing people who deserve to be seen as fully human and made in the image of God. This kind of metaphor falls into the category of too many interpretations of

healing narratives that suggest that someone experiencing physical or mental disability is only made whole when they are restored to an able-bodied state. Having a normative body or mind is not what determines wholeness.

Disability theology invites us to see the healing narratives, not as episodes where Jesus fixes people and thus gets them back to being normal or whole again, but as instances where Jesus restores people back to community, back to belonging, back to relationship with their worshiping body. Oftentimes, if you were suffering from an illness or disability in the social structure of the time you were not allowed to worship at the temple, so in healing people, Jesus meets people where they are. By removing the barrier to participation, he restores relationships and a sense of belonging for those being relegated to the margins, to the tombs, to outside the temple gates.

One disability theologian, Stephanie Tait talks about this way of interpretation at length. While reflecting on the ways the post resurrection narratives teach us more about how to view our own wounds and differences, she asks, how could we, as Christian community, interpret the healing narratives as portraying people suffering from the wounds of this world in need of being fixed when Christ himself is resurrected with gaping wounds and yet is called perfect in that resurrection?

What would it mean for us if we followed the way of Jesus and cleared a path for all to belong in our worshiping community? What if we each took time to reflect on the behaviors and systems in our wider culture, like white supremacy and ableism, that prevent people from fully participating in an experience of belonging? A sense of belonging is such a qualitative experience, so how do we through our actions and our theology proactively give people a reason to trust that they belong? That they are a part of us. That there is no “us” and “first time visitors” or “we” and some imagined ambiguous “them,” that when we say “we” an image appears in our minds eye: of anyone and everyone who walks through our doors, of people who don’t look like us or worship like us, of those who experience our worship even just for a day, or of people who click on our YouTube links and like our Instagram posts. The formulation of what and who we are is a collective project, made possible by the Holy Spirit and by people we perhaps have yet to meet that are already a part of our story that is continually unfolding. The more I think about belonging within faith communities, the more I understand “We” to be a relational and expansive pronoun, not a possessive one.

A question that has been on my mind this week is this: when do you know that a place is home for you? One of the images that this conjures for me is when you are at a friend’s house and you feel comfortable reaching for something in the fridge for the first time without a thought as to if it’s rude or not. How do we make it clear that we are a “close friend fridge” kind of church, where everyone should

feel comfortable opening the metaphorical or physical fridge to pick out something nourishing? How can we be a church where we not only know exactly where the fridge is, but we instinctively know that it's ours to open?

These questions around belonging are topics that a group of us at First Church are wrestling with as we prepare to welcome people back into the sanctuary for worship in the coming weeks. Will you join us in reflecting on these important questions? We'd love to hear from you because we all need to be co-conspirators in this project together. If we are going to participate in the beloved community it must be done with each other's help. Seriously, send me an email.

Perhaps it's not just about knowing where the fridge is. Perhaps our sense of belonging does not only have to do with outside forces but has something to do with the stories we have been telling ourselves. The stories that no longer serve us and lead us away from accepting a sense of belonging from our neighbor: stories that we aren't enough if we don't work ourselves into the ground, that we aren't deserving of love because we fall outside of society's norm, that we don't sound smart enough, that we will never find a place that feels like home. To let go of these stories when we are dependent upon them is in many ways as terrifying as hearing the echo of a legion of demon voices bursting out of our lungs. Perhaps the unknown of what would happen if we give them up scares us more than managing and tolerating things as they are because at least what we are familiar with, is comfortable. I invite us to ask ourselves, what would we be giving up by fully leaning into a belief that we all belong no matter who we are or what body we have?

According to the text this naked man had been living this way, possessed and among the tombs without a home for a long time. There wasn't language of fear surrounding that reality and yet, when the neighbors came to see the man sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and healed, they were seized with great fear not once, but twice and in the end demanded that Jesus leave them. Sometimes our collective liberation is a little daunting because the force of its power is unlike anything we have imagined before. The way we feel the emotions of excitement and fear are so similar in our bodies that sometimes we feel both at once. A world where the power of God is strong enough to dismantle the systems and walls that uphold known ways of being that do not include everyone, in favor of unknown paths that lead to true belonging for all evokes both excitement and hope and tentative fear of a power that propels us into a life dependent upon the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which is known for defying our expectations, and as humans we like to expect what is coming for us.

By embracing opportunities to belong and to provide those same opportunities to others we are able to step into relationships that bring us closer to God. Writer and poet, Bekah Maren, shares a reflection about diversity, divinity, and belonging on her blog. Within it she asks, “How can we come closer to this being beyond our comprehension, this bodymind that meets none of our expectations?

By freeing ourselves of expectations.

By searching for God in the unique bodyminds of our fellow human beings.

By seeking to understand that which challenges us, and confuses us, and frightens us.

By accepting ourselves, and the bodyminds that make us who we are.”

She claims that: “When we pray that all of this may be so; when we pray to love all bodies and minds; when we pray to be both broken and whole at once: we are praying to be more like God.”

May it be so.

Amen.

