

Isaiah 65:1-9
Psalm 22:18-27
Galatians 3:23-39
Luke 8:26-39

Pentecost 7C
St Thomas, Medina
June 19, 2016
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Choosing Options

There is a place on the banks of the Mississippi River just outside of Red Wing Minnesota called Friedrich's Point. There is a beautiful old summer home, a fabulous tree house, horseshoes, canoes and croquet. It's been in my husband's family for generations, and to be there is to go back to a time when life was simpler and slower. A flag flies over the property whenever folks are there. The motto printed on the flag says "Friedrich's Point: Where doing nothing is always an option."

I haven't been able to stop thinking of the Friedrich's Point motto these past few days. But these days, it isn't making me smile. As a matter of fact, I find it quite convicting. Oh, I know it's true... doing nothing is always an option. But that's actually the reason I'm feeling so convicted. Because doing nothing has been an option I've taken since the first mass shooting I can remember at a McDonald's in San Ysidro, California in 1984. My infant son was three months old, and as every mother knows, some possibilities are too horrifying to consider. So I held my baby close, protected him as best I could, and left the problems of the wider world to the wider world. Since then, there have been thousands of mass shootings. THOUSANDS. As it turns out, doing nothing actually isn't an option.

Exactly one year of Sundays ago, on the 7th Sunday after Pentecost in 2015, I stood in this pulpit utterly heartsick and preaching about the murder of 9 beautiful souls who were gunned down in the midst of a Bible Study at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. I spoke of temptation to forget that we are the ones who carry the Christ light, the ones who must be the heart and hands and feet of God. I spoke of the temptation to want an all-powerful god who will put a stop to all the nonsense, a god who is all about supremacy and might, a king who would rule over all, overpowering and eliminating everything and everyone that disagrees with what "we" agree with. A god who would finally DO SOMETHING about all this. I told you I knew it was not God's will that racial violence and gun violence and hatred and fear-mongering and divisive rhetoric permeate our common life in America, but they did. They did then, and the hatred and violence and fear-mongering and divisive rhetoric have only escalated since then. As it turns out, doing nothing actually isn't an option.

I ask myself, do we really have to live like this? Do we really have to live in a world where a broken, hate-filled person can buy a gun that is made for the sole purpose of killing as many people as possible in as little time as possible, and then go and use it on anyone and everyone he

deems the “other?” I don’t think so. But wishing Columbine, Newton, Emmanuel, Orlando and all those other mass murders hadn’t happened, and praying that it will never happen again will not change anything. And God knows, something needs to change. Do you know that there have been 8 mass shootings SINCE Orlando? Lord have mercy.

We need to change. We need to do more than confess our sins of things done and left undone. We need to do and to undo. We need to act. Each and every one of us needs to find our own God-given way to take action against the evil forces in our world. In his recent blog “Behind Orlando,” our own Bishop Rickel quoted Rabbi Heschel, saying “Few are guilty, but all are responsible.” And so it is. As important as it is that we pray for the victims and pray for the perpetrators and pray for forgiveness and compassionate hearts, I think our prayers are not enough. They are essential, but they are not enough. Prayer is the foundation for action, not a substitute for it.

God’s love comes into the world through our actions. Yours and mine. But like the Garasenes who threw Jesus out of town, we are afraid. It is a fearsome thing to look into the face of so much pain, so much suffering, so many demons. We cannot bear it. It is too painful. And so we change the radio station, scroll down the page, or toss yet another plea for help into the recycling bin. It is too much, and if we were really to acknowledge the unspeakable heartache that lurks underneath the busyness of our fortunate lives, we would surely become paralyzed, because it’s all so big and so scary and so utterly unbelievable.

But there, right there in the middle of that scary place is where we can begin to find our way back to God’s dream for us all. We start by refusing to look the other way, by looking into the faces of the ones who are suffering and to hold that suffering with them. We start by learning the names of the people who died, by recognizing their faces, by learning a little something of who they were in the world and what the world lost when they were lost. And perhaps even more challenging, we start by entering into the suffering of the ones who do the killing. It’s what Jesus did with that poor soul in Garasa... he began by recognizing his humanity and calling him back into his own true identity as the beloved of God.

You see, when we stop distracting ourselves with platitudes and policies and getting what’s due us – thank God we don’t get what we’re due – when we stop distracting ourselves by demonizing people, or throwing our hands up and saying it’s all too much, when we refuse to turn our backs and go on with our important and busy lives, THEN we can allow ourselves to be with the ones who are hurting. And when we let that happen, when we let our hearts become tender so we can suffer with the ones whose hearts are breaking, that’s when God gets in. And once that happens, we’re well on our way to finding our place in the big story of God’s dream for the world.

Only you and God can discern your particular place in loving the world back to wholeness, and it's absolutely essential that we allow ourselves whatever we need in order to hear God's word to us. We don't always remember that deepening our relationship with God is the surest path to wholeness for ourselves and for the world, but it is. God calls each of us to action in ways that are uniquely our own, yes. And still the truth is, God calls each and every one of us to action. And that can be uncomfortable. Maybe even really uncomfortable. Like the Gerasenes, we recognize the mystery and the power of what God can do, but we can't make sense of how that fits into our actual lives. We often prefer the devil we know to the life with Jesus we don't know, and so our response to God's awesome power to change us is sometimes just like the Gerasene's response. We simply ask Jesus to leave. We ask him to leave because we think it's going to be easier that way. But God knows better, and thank God Jesus always comes looking for us.

Jesus crossed over to the other side, into the unclean territory of the unclean people with their unclean swine, and their unclean tombs, just to call that demon-possessed man back to the truth of himself as God's own beloved. Nothing else happened in that town. There was just that one lost soul that Jesus came for. And he came because he knew that the power of God's love was the only thing that could cast away a whole Legion of demons.

This is such an important story. It's a story about terror and power and unspeakable love. It's a story about crossing boundaries, about going into places that are scary, meeting up with people who are scary, and making God's love so present that people begin to remember who and whose they are. The healing power of God's love is the one thing that will cast out the demons and open the eyes of our hearts so that we can see and name and change the places where the demons seem to rule, wherever those places may be. When we open the eyes of our hearts, it isn't hard to recognize the places, because they're the places where relationships are out of sorts. That's what demons do, you know, they put relationships out of sorts. And when relationships are out of sorts, whether they be Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, rich and poor, men and women, black, brown and white, gay and straight, Christian and Muslim, Palestinian and Israeli, crazy and not crazy ... when relationships are out of sorts, there is unspeakable destruction and incomprehensible suffering.

And so, my dears, today we're once again reminded that our God is a God who never gives up on us, a God who has entrusted us to one another, a God whose name is love and who not only calls us to love but insists on love. Ours is a story about going as far as it takes to make things right, to call the people and the world back into right relationship. We cannot be distracted by the immensity of the problem or by feeling like we are just one person in a sea of madness. God is loving the world back to wholeness right this very minute, through someone just like you. God is everywhere present, loving even the ones who wouldn't dream of calling God by name. But if we don't carry that love to them, whether they be our political representatives or the people who talk to the lamp posts on the street, how will they ever know of it?

As it turns out, doing nothing actually isn't an option. God is loving the whole wide world back into wholeness right this very minute, and it's time for each one of us to find our place in it. So talk with each other. Pray with each other. Find ways to take action with each other. God will continue to love as long as time exists, but we really do need to remember that we are the instruments of God's boundless love. God didn't tell us that it would be easy. But very little that matters is actually easy.

"I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask," the prophet Isaiah tells us, "to be found by those who did not seek me. I said 'Here I am, here I am'...."

I think that's what God wants for us too. When the Lord God spoke through the prophet Isaiah, we were hearing about how we too are to live. In the face of the demons, we are called to be the presence of God's love in the world. "Here I am, here I am..." Amen.