

And they were afraid. These are the most revealing words in today's Gospel. For it is fear which dictates the actions of the people as they watch and witness as one of their own is healed and restored. Demons gone, he sits at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid.

In Jesus' time, a person living on the streets, consumed by voices and often disruptive to society was said to be possessed. It often was assumed that the person, or his family, had sinned, and this was the suffering that resulted. In today's world, we have seen similar behaviors in our homeless brothers and sisters. Rather than possession, we would be more inclined to name it as mental illness.

We may have family or friends who live with mental health challenges, some of us may have personal experience. The stigma attached to depression, anxiety, bi-polar or schizophrenic disorders can leave one isolated, feeling exiled, and it can be difficult to navigate social circles and community. We who watch from a distance may worry for our loved one's well being and safety. Fear may overtake us, leaving us anxious about what we cannot explain or understand, or control. Sometimes, our fear causes us to turn our heads and look the other way; other times, arising out of deep care, our inclination is to want to help the situation, to try to control that which is frightening, or simply to make it go away.

Last week I overheard a conversation between a convenience store clerk and a customer as I was checking out. Talking about homelessness, the customer said, "You know, Marina has a lot of vacant, open land. They ought to send all the homeless people over there, get them out of site." My first response was surprise and I felt quick to judge this person's desire to disappear the outcasts of society. But her words lingered with me, and as I reflected on them, I realized that there have been times when I, too, have felt so uncomfortable, that I wanted to avoid those begging on the corners, wanted not to see them as if not seeing them could make them, and the issue of homelessness not exist.

It is easy to become overwhelmed by what we do not understand, or cannot control. In our despair, we may pray for healing, for restoration, that God might intervene. It may be difficult, though, to imagine what that healing might look like, or to know how we would respond. We, like the people of Gerasa, may find ourselves frightened, and when healing does come, even more afraid, wondering if we can trust it, wondering what more we could have done?

Jesus crosses the sea, and encounters this man possessed by a legion of demons, demons that upon recognizing Jesus beg Him not to cast them into the abyss, but rather into a herd of pigs where they might dwell. But Jesus didn't come to just displace evil, Jesus came to cast it out. So, Agreeing to their request, He sends them into the pigs, that then charge into the sea and drown. Yet for the gentile pig herders, this was shocking, and scary. In Jewish culture where pigs are seen as unclean, sending demons to dwell inside of a pig might seem an equitable solution. For the gentile pig herders, what they have witnessed is shocking and scary. They are left without their herds, and what remains is a human being. This man from the town, once unclothed, erratic, and unable to be consoled or contained, who now sits calmly at the feet of Jesus, clothed, fully rational — transformed. Word spreads. Fear rises. Is it true? How could this happen? Who did this? The people come, but upon seeing the man with their own eyes, rather than rejoice in his healing, they are consumed in fear— fear significant enough to send Jesus, the one who has healed one of their own, away. Luke leaves us wondering why?

Today we celebrate Juneteenth, the now national holiday which honors the day in 1865 when the union General George Granger came to inform the Texan people that all slaves were now free. He said, "This involves absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them that becomes employer and hired labor." In the time between when Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation took effect, January 1, 1863, and the day when black people in Texas heard this announcement, President Lincoln died, Richmond fell to the Union Army, and the 13th Amendment was well on its way toward ratification. It wasn't that Texas didn't get the news, but more that slave owners in Texas withheld the news, in an effort to maintain their status quo. As Black people in Texas rejoiced and celebrated this news, many white people found themselves afraid. Sadly, many blacks who attempted to step out in freedom faced peril: being forced to remain as before, or to die trying to flee.

A grassroots effort, however, arose and transformed June 19th into the first Juneteenth celebration in Texas in 1866. It became a day to gather lost family members, to measure progress against freedom, and to teach rising generations about the value of self-improvement and racial uplift. It was a day of celebration, and remembering that included a reading of the emancipation proclamation, sermons and spirituals, the preservation of slave food delicacies, and traditions passed down generation to generation. When the Jim Crow faithful of Texas forbid blacks to use their public spaces, black people would gather at rivers and lakes, raising money to buy their own celebration sites. Emancipation Park in Houston and Booker T. Washington Park in Mexia, TX are just two of those celebration sites. Gradually the Juneteenth holiday was shared by families and spread across the nation.

After the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, others were left to carry out his plan to return to the site of his "I have a dream" speech in Washington DC. When the Poor People's March fell short of its goals, the organizers cut it short on June 19, 1968, well aware that it was just a little over 100 years earlier that Juneteenth was founded. Those present took this new awareness home to their states, and with renewed energy, and the voice and courage of Representative Al Edwards, Texas in 1979 became the first state to make Juneteenth an official holiday. Since then 41 other states and the District of Columbia recognized Juneteenth as a state holiday, and this month, Juneteenth is now a Federal Holiday. Today, as we raise our voices in prayer and song, we are called to reflect upon the emancipation of enslaved Black Americans on June 19, 1865, and as we do, to honor the deep significance this day has for our black siblings, as we strive for racial equity and unity.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul calls for a unity in Christ that dispels the barriers we create around difference, barriers that we erect to ensure that others do what we want, or that keep others in their place. Of difference Paul writes: there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male or female. He speaks to three spheres of social strife that impact our ability to be generous and gracious with one another: The first is the ethnic / racial sphere in which our human propensity to categorize and segment ourselves and others based on ethnic / racial attributes disallows unity. The second is the economic sphere, a space in which people are allowed or disallowed access, education, or inclusion by virtue of their economic status. And the third is the gender sphere in which access or privilege are either granted or denied based on gender identity.

For Paul, unity in Christ does not disappear the distinctions that make us uniquely who we are. These distinctions, like ethnicity or gender, remain and reflect the beauty and diversity of God's people. What Paul is pleading for is not the eradication of difference, but the eradication of the dominance that is displayed when difference is used as a tool to wield power-over another person or group. We have a long history of abuses of power across these spheres. Wherever and whenever those with power and privilege disallow the other or the different, the same access and freedoms they enjoy; whenever our fear of difference causes us to exclude, to exile or cast out the other, the unity fostered by God's love in Jesus is diminished.

Fear can paralyze us and cause us to reject God's healing grace. Jesus crossed the sea into gentile land, freed and healed a man possessed, so that the world might see and witness God's awesome power to save and restore. And yet fear caused them to reject God, in Jesus, and to reject God's invitation to receive their own healing and transformation.

Yet it was not for naught. What Jesus left behind was a man restored and transformed, a new disciple, called to tell any who would listen what God had done for him. With his faith, and by his words, this one man began to break down the barriers that had once kept him exiled. That is what God's healing grace does for us. It transforms our fear into hope, our sorrows into joy.

June is a month full of articles, flags, events and celebrations focused upon Pride and Juneteenth. Each invites us to deepen our knowledge of the significant cultural and historical identities of our neighbors. We may not know what to do, or where to begin, and our fear of the unknown or concern of looking foolish can prevent us from seeking justice or modeling a more inclusive environment. We begin by seeking to understand, by listening to and honoring another's truth; , and then by practicing letting go of our fears: of difference, of losing power or control; our fear of the other.

When we feel overwhelmed by the heaviness of the world; when fear threatens to overtake us, or causes us to put up the protective barriers we think will keep us safe, we may turn to God, asking for the courage and strength to not flee, to not turn away, but to turn toward the God who loves us, heals us, and transforms us as we rejoice in awe and wonder. Fear no more, Christ joins us together.