

Sermon Preached on June 19, 2022 – The Second Sunday after Pentecost

by The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Yarmouth, ME 04096

1 Kings 19:1-15a

Galatians 3:23-29

Luke 8:26-39

Centering the Legions

This morning's gospel text is always one that gives me pause in a "wow, I need to chew on this one for a while" kind of way

And this week is no exception

In this morning's text, we hear about Jesus' interaction with a man named "Legion" – so named because he was consumed by a number of demons that tortured him and which, subsequently, ostracized him from his community

As Luke tells us: he was "a man of the city who had demons. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs...many times [the demons] had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds." (Luke 8:27-30)

The image of this scene cuts my heart open as I imagine the man – alone, tormented – living in tombs, his nakedness – it's heartbreaking

Some scholars point to his nickname, "Legion," and make the connection between this man and the name for the Roman army – which would have also been called a "legion" – drawing a meaning-making line between Jesus healing this man and the liberation that was so sought after regarding the Roman Empire

It would be as if this man today were called “Brigade” or “Company” – or, perhaps a less militaristic analogy that still makes the connection to the control and tyranny of empire might be if this man’s name were “McDonalds” or “Walmart”

Scholars who make this point want us to see the systems at work in our world and how Jesus offers us an alternative way of being, existing, and relating to each other

This week, though, I wonder if “Legion” is still the name we need to ponder in our hearts – not because of the connection to a Roman army, but because of the second definition of “legion” that you get when you google the meaning of the word, which is: “a vast host, multitude, or number of people or things”

This week, I keep thinking of the vast multitude of demons this person carried in his body – the vast multitude of identities, the vast multitude of diagnoses, the vast multitude of challenges he faced, the vast multitude of systems that made all of those identities and diagnoses so oppressive

I am struck by the vast multitude – the legion – that was embodied in this one person

The term many folks use today to describe this idea is “intersectionality.”

As Nelson George of the New York Times explains in an article he published, ““Intersectionality” is a [new word] introduced in 1989 by the Black law professor [Kimberlé Crenshaw](#), who teaches at U.C.L.A. and Columbia University. The concept invites us to see various forms of inequality as a prism. Its original organizing principle — that Black women are subject to discrimination based not just on race, class or sex but the interaction of all of them — has since been applied to other groups and animates much of today’s progressive political conversations and activity.”¹

¹ George, Nelson. “Angela Davis.” 19 October 2020. <<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/10/19/t-magazine/angela-davis.html>>

When you shine light on a prism, it reveals the vast multitude of colors in the light spectrum that ultimately makes up that single light beam

Intersectionality illuminates the diversity that is embodied in each us, we are the prisms

And, Dr. Crenshaw coined the term, as Nelson writes, to describe how these identities which have been marginalized by society, dare we say demonized by society, work together to work against you

The Black women Dr. Crenshaw was representing as a lawyer weren't just struggling because of their race, or their class, or their gender – they were struggling because of the combined impact of all of those things all at once

Intersectionality: Legion

I see Legion embodied in this weekend where we're celebrating Pride, Juneteenth, and Father's Day all at the same time

In some ways, this weekend has worked itself out so that Pride was celebrated yesterday, Father's Day today, and Juneteenth tomorrow when you get a day off from work

Which mimics what our society does so often which is to create silos for each cause – we have our queer advocates, our immigrant advocates, our racial justice advocates, our disability advocates never truly recognizing or celebrating that there are queer, Black, disabled, new Mainers in our communities who cannot separate any of those parts of themselves

This weekend is Pride, Father's Day AND Juneteenth all together, all at once, all at the same time

In Luke's gospel this morning, I see Legion, and I can't help but think of the people in our communities who embody that wonderful diversity God has

created them to be and who, because of that very diversity, are ostracized, cast out, deemed a threat to society, not worthy of a loan, not going anywhere

I see in Legion the weight of intersectionality in our society – every identity a mark against you, another opportunity for just a little bit more resistance to who you are

I see Legion and I think not just of individuals, but I think of whole communities of people who bear the weight of our world's oppressions

Intersectionality: Legion

As soon as Jesus starts approaching Legion, the demons speak through him and say “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me”

Immediately, the beasts of intersectionality recognize the power of the great liberator, the great lover that is Jesus and they fear what that kind of love can do

And Jesus heals him

I don't imagine that healing as a stripping of Legion's identities – though the story uses some dramatic imagery of the demons leaving the man and going into pigs who then run into the sea!

But, what if Jesus' healing, Jesus' love, Jesus' reconciliation finds the point of intersection of our identities and doesn't allow them to work together to hurt us anymore, but rather heals those intersections to help us see how incredibly beautiful they are!

For Jesus, the intersectionality of identities isn't the trouble, it's the chains and shackles society puts on them, it's the tombs and the isolation that society imposes on them

Jesus sees Legion not for how broken and worthless he is – as society clearly sees him – but for how beautiful God has made him to be

And, that kind of love, that kind of radical love and acceptance, is terrifying to the systems that try to control us because it has the power to tear them down

This weekend we get a glimpse of what a world which celebrates the beautiful intersection of identities can look like by celebrating Pride, Father's Day, and Juneteenth all at the same time

It is beautiful!

And when we get that glimpse, when our awareness of God's wonder grows like that, we notice that there are still so many Legions in this world like the one in our story from Luke this morning who still feel so ostracized and who struggle so immensely in the world because of systems that shackle and chain them down

Our love and understanding grows, but our love and understanding needs to be connected to action

A few years ago, before COVID, I went and heard Dr. Angela Davis speak at UNE at their Martin Luther King Jr event.

She's an amazing thinker and speaker, and one of the things she said that day has stuck with me

When Dr. Davis was asked by some young people in the audience, how to address the needs and movements of our day, Dr. Davis said: think about the most marginalized person in your community and work to make your community work for them, and we'll all be okay

Work to make a world where that most marginalized person – Legion – is okay, and we'll all be okay

And I can't help but think that that's an incredibly Christian message – because that's what Jesus did

Jesus' ministry, as witnessed today in the story of Legion, was about seeing the most marginalized in his surroundings and healing them, loving them, accompanying them, trying to change the world so that they were taken care of

God is the great author of all that is and all that we are – our identities are the threads that God has woven together to create the great masterpiece that is me, that is you

It is sin, brokenness, greed, temptation that have taken those beautiful threads and made them distinct and hierarchical, some valued, some dis-valued

Jesus came to heal, love, and restore our community into that great, intersecting tapestry of beauty

Let us journey with Jesus and to love Legion.

Amen.