
'Clothed in Our Right Minds:' A Gospel of Mental Health for Terrorists and the Rest of Us

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Proper 7 – Year C

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and our redeemer. Amen. —Psalm 19:14 (adapt.)

There's a message for us here today about synchronicity. That word was coined by Carl Jung, one of the founders of modern psychology. Jung used synchronicity to refer to 'meaningful coincidences'—connections that occur 'at the same time' and often in unexpected ways; in ways that mean more to us than ordinary coincidences. For instance we all forget things every day; that's ordinary and expected. But forgetting something, for example, that makes us return home and discover to our surprise that we need to turn off the oven—well, that's synchronicity!

Today's gospel story offers a major synchronicity that I want to explore with you in a minute. But there's a more lighthearted and more humorous story of synchronicity that also connects with our gospel. Humor is useful here because it can provide a balance for us; a counterweight to so many other meanings that involve tragedy, catastrophe, or atrocity. Here's a lighthearted example of humorous synchronicity.

A man in the Midwest discovers a receipt for shoe repair while packing his bags for a weekend trip to New York. It's a ten-year-old receipt from a shop in the Bronx where he left a favorite pair of shoes that he'd forgotten to pick up.

"I wonder if they could still be there after all these years," he thinks to himself. So after arriving in New York he finds the shop still there and open on a Friday afternoon. And not only that, but the same old shopkeeper is there too. As he shuffles out from the back of the shop he appears older of course; hunched over but still professional looking in his leather apron.

"Excuse me," the businessman says, "but 10 years ago I left a pair of shoes with you that I never picked up. Is there any chance you might still have them?"

The shopkeeper stares at him and asks, "Were they black wingtips?"

"They were indeed," the man says.

"And you wanted a half sole, with rubber heels?"

"Yes," he answered. "That's exactly what I wanted."

"And you wanted taps on the heels only?"

"Yes, yes," the businessman says excitedly, impressed that the old man remembers the shoes with such detail.

"Amazing! Do you still have them? I'm leaving town and I'd love to take them with me."

The shopkeeper goes to the back of the shop to look for them. By now the man is hopeful that he can pack his bags that night with his favorite shoes. Finally the old man returns to the counter and announces,

"They'll be ready on Wednesday."

Adapted from 'Klonsky's Shoe Repair in the Bronx:' <http://friarsclub.com/joke/3019/>

That's right: "They'll be ready on Wednesday." Some things never change, do they? One coincidence can happen after another. Each one more unlikely than the last, and still the story ends with the 'same-old same-old.' Maybe that's an ordinary happenstance that defies synchronicity; a case of 'Murphy's law' or the status quo, where our shoes are rarely ready when we're ready, but typically ready "on Wednesday!"

And that brings us to today's gospel. With today's gospel we have two kinds of coincidence. The first is a coincidence created by the fact that our scriptures appointed for today both use the word 'clothed' in a special way. "As many of us as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ," Paul says in Galatians. And therefore, he concludes,

"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" (Galatians 3:27-28).

Thus baptism displaces ordinary identities based on ethnic origin, social status, and gender categories. Spiritually-speaking, baptism 're-clothes' us in a common Christ-like identity instead.

A more literal use of the word, "clothed," occurs in our gospel reading. Here a man described as demon-possessed was so mentally disturbed that he literally wore no clothes, while living outside the city among the tombs. Later in the reading he has been healed by Jesus and is discovered by the townspeople to be "sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind" (Luke 8:35). Now many of us with Southern roots and especially in African-American churches have grown up hearing that scripture not as literally written, "clothed and in his right mind." Rather we have heard it paraphrased and preached as, "clothed in his right mind" (cf. www.metrogazette.com/blog/are-you-clothed-your-right-mind). And this metaphorical meaning provides me a set-up, as your preacher here today, to connect being 'clothed in our right mind' with 'clothing ourselves with Christ.'

What would it mean for us here today to be both 'clothed with Christ' and 'clothed in our right mind?' Remarkably, that question leads to a second meaningful coincidence connected with our gospel for today. It is a meaningful coincidence or synchronicity with the tragic shooting that occurred one week ago in Orlando, Florida. But I wonder if we will conclude in a few minutes with a more ordinary coincidence of the same-old thing happening again: some status quo; some business as usual. See what you think.

In both cases today—the case of our gospel and the case of the Orlando shooting— we have the coincidence of a deranged person. In Orlando it's the story of Omar Mateen, born in the U.S. of Afghan parents; a young Florida man with identity issues that he acted out on other people in a vicious way; a way that seemed also self-directed. [In the gospel of Mark the demoniac's violence was also self-inflicted (Mark 5:5).] In our gospel it's the story of a demon-possessed man, a so-called demoniac, who is identified by the scriptures as "a man of the city ... [who] 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, 29). It's noteworthy here that the man was "kept" on the one hand; kept guarded by his fellow citizens. But on the other hand he was unable to be fully restrained. There's something intractable in both cases; a situation impossible to resolve by ordinary means.

Omar Mateen was known as a troubled youth by educators throughout his school years. He was expelled at one point, at another suspended after fighting. Apparently he was also bullied on occasion by other students. Remarkably he went on from high school to earn an associate's degree in criminal justice science. His employment included qualifications as a security guard with a firearms license. Eventually his trips to Saudi Arabia, his stated allegiance to the terrorist groups al-Qaeda and Hezbollah, and his inflammatory remarks at work brought him to the attention of the FBI. There he was identified and interviewed as a potential terrorist threat. But finally he could not be detained on legal grounds, like the demoniac who kept escaping the "chains and shackles" attempted by his fellow citizens. (Source: Wikipedia article on [Omar Mateen](#) accessed 6/18/2016).

And here the similarities appear to end. In the gospel story our demoniac encounters Jesus; Jesus who takes the initiative to exorcise or deliver him from his demons; Jesus who acts on his own prerogative and without any appeal from the possessed man or his community. Indeed for half of the story it is only the demons with whom Jesus is engaged. They are "Legion," as they name themselves when Jesus begins expelling them from the man. And they are the ones speaking with the man's voice when he says,

“What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me—“

Finally, they beg him “not to order them to go back into the abyss,” but instead let them enter a large herd of swine feeding on the hillside. “So he gave them permission,” the scripture says (Luke 8:28, 31-32).

But as we know that’s not the end of the story. When the demons enter the pigs they panic and rush over a steep bank and drown in the lake. Now it’s precisely here that the meaningful coincidences between our gospel story and our Orlando shooting reconnect. And they reconnect by way of absence. What is absent in the Orlando shooting is that the demons of hate and violence are not contained or exorcised, or expelled outside the city limits. Rather they are unleashed within the city itself to act-out their vicious identity on the citizens themselves. In the Orlando shooting we have the tragedy of what happens when the gospel does not get to be the rest of the story.

We are the rest of that story. That’s right: you and I are challenged to be fellow and sister citizens of that city that knows how to intervene in the lives of its troubled youth at the point of their extremity. We are among those challenged to make available resources that provide treatment for mental illness, hate, and violence. And we are the ones called to deal with demonic forces in ways that do not contaminate the public square and the city center. ‘We are the ones we have been waiting for,’ as a popular slogan says nowadays.

In reflecting on this gospel call to our communal identity I personally experienced another synchronicity that occurred for me last week. I was searching for something in my office. Serendipitously my eyes ran across the following item, as if it had been waiting all along for this week of tragedy and challenge. It was an advertisement for the Journal of Muslim Mental Health. It’s been sitting in my office for at least eight years, set aside as an interesting resource that I thought I might respond to one day. Well, here is the day of response. And here is how that 2008 advertisement reads, appealing to all of us for the following kind of response to troubled Muslim youth like Omar Mateen. It reads:

A void in the Muslim mental health literature has become increasingly glaring, and a number of important questions exist:

- What is the impact of current geo-political conflicts on the mental health of Muslims worldwide?
- What are the mental health belief systems and coping behaviors of ethnically and geographically diverse Muslim groups?
- Do mental health professionals and institutions provide a culturally and religiously responsive approach to their Muslim clients?

The Journal editors then go on to state their goals:

[to make] relevant research data, typically overlooked by more general mental health journals, readily available within and beyond the academic community ... [to present] service-oriented work that will allow institutions and public service systems to deliver more effective mental health care to their Muslim communities ... [and to provide] religiously sensitive psychotherapy techniques ... [including] mental health prevention and intervention programs. www.journalofmuslimmentalhealth.org/about.html accessed 6/18/2016

Now I would call all that an appeal for ‘outreach;’ outreach—that familiar term in our church communities. And with that word we come to the climax of our synchronicities here today. In the gospel story we have a failed community that does the same old thing over and over again, attempting to restrain its deranged fellow citizens. But nothing different changes until Jesus intervenes with an act of healing rather than binding the man involved. And by dealing with the man’s demons rather than improving his chains, Jesus also confronts the man’s fellow citizens and challenges them in their false approach to security.

Nonetheless they are terrified by what Jesus has done. You recall how the story ends. It’s a close call as to whether the people are more terrified by the *violence* of the demoniac or by the *healing* of the demoniac. When the swineherds run off to tell about his healing their news creates panic among the people—much like the panic of the pigs. As the scripture says,

“Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and [departed]” (Luke 8:35, 37).

Christian friends, here we see that the challenge of this gospel for the people of that land is a challenge for us too; a

challenge for us to be ‘clothed in our right minds.’ For there is a synergy between the demon-possession of the man in this story and the fear-possession of his fellow citizens. Their form of possession requires that the man remain in his place as the identified problem in the community. Meanwhile the people of the city get the privilege of appearing to themselves to be normal; just regular folks. But under the surface, and not too far under the surface, their fear is also part of the problem.

In fact there is an identity between the “Legion” named by the demons and the legion of fear inhabiting the people themselves. As the story begins they are fearful of their fellow citizen. But when he is cured it is revealed that their fear is the fear of change; the fear that healing and health will affect their livelihood and the sources of their livelihood as represented by the herd of swine drowning in the lake.

In this context we too are confronted with this final question about meaningful coincidences; synchronicities between the gospel story and our own story. How are our communities like and unlike the people of that city? Are we clothed in our right minds, or rather fear-possessed and terror driven ourselves?

In particular this gospel challenges those of us who are Christ-like—who have by baptism ‘clothed ourselves with Christ.’ The gospel challenges us to demonstrate that we have ourselves been delivered from the powers of fear and hate; to extend outreach based on the truth that among us “there is no longer Jew or Greek ... slave or free ... male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:27-28).

Let us prove that we are *dis*-possessed—dis-possessed of the legion of powers that drive the world of terror and violence. And we can do so by answering the command that Jesus issues to the demoniac when he wanted to follow Jesus away from his land and his people. Rather, Jesus sends him back to his land and his people, saying:

“Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.’ So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him” (Luke 8:38-9).

So let us also go back into our communities and in all our relationships proclaim how much Jesus has done for us, by clothing us in our right minds too.

In the name of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.